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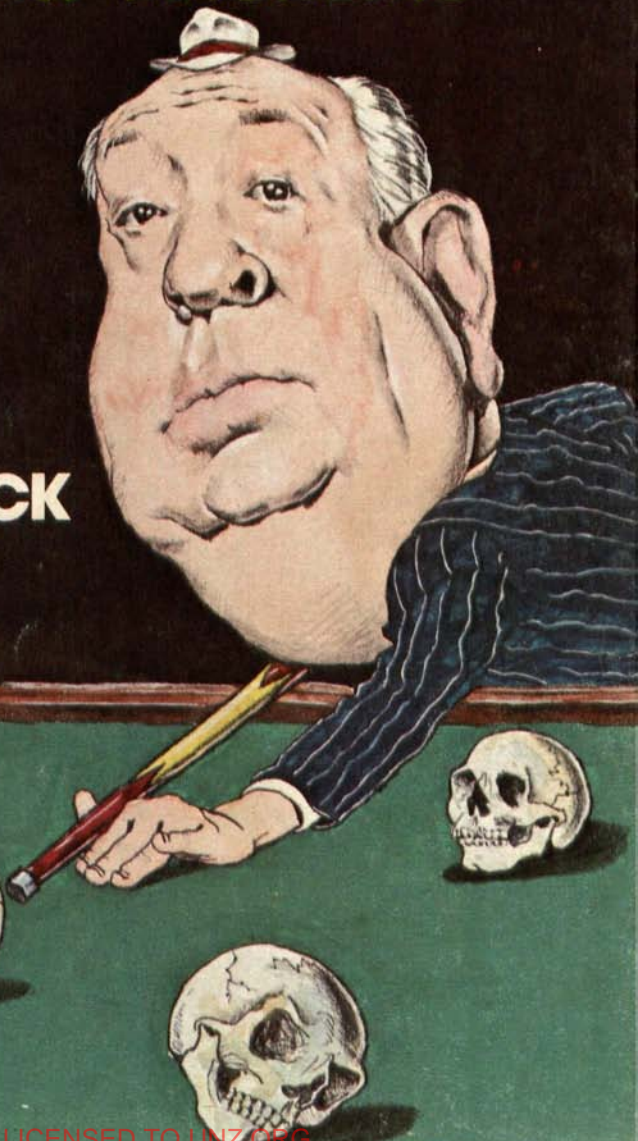
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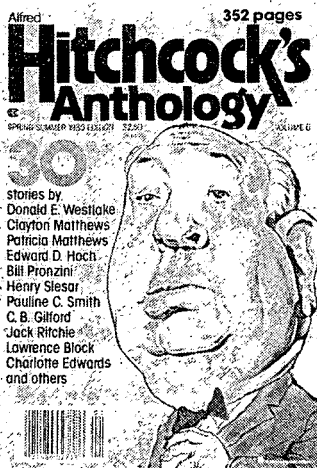


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VOLUME 25, NO. 1

JANUARY 30, 1980

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HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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HOA373

January 30, 1980



Dear Reader:

"The female of the species," Kipling tells us, "is more deadly than the male," and this month's stories would seem to bear that out.

You'll see how a couple of females deal with a boorish, overbearing male in "Sweetheart, I'm Dry!" by Ernest Savage, and how a rich old man's relations react when he marries in "The Rise and Fall of Sarah Merrion" by Anne Morice.

Another married couple have their problems in Julia DeHahn's "Looking the Other Way," and infidelity breeds contempt—and murder—in "Making a Killing with Mama Cass" by William Bankier. You'll learn what happens to a woman in love with her husband in "Murder Method" by Talmage Powell.

Don't think, though, that we're disregarding the deadly aspects of the male of the species—take a look at John Lutz's chiller, "Until You Are Dead."

I'm glad that so many of you have responded to our suggestion about a letters column. You'll find the first column on page 61—and do keep writing.

Good reading.

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Gary wanted to make a movie about Cass Elliott . . .

MAKING A KILLING WITH MAMA CASS



by **WILLIAM BANKIER**

“Why weren’t you at the airport?” Gary Prime said to his wife Anitra as she let herself into the apartment. “The car would have made sense. Instead I was stuck with an eight-dollar taxi.” This was about as much anger as Gary ever expressed.

“I got your wire but Lee had important clients in the screening room. I had to be there.” Anitra glanced at herself in a mirror, wondering if her adventure had made any visible difference. Gary back a day early was

all she needed. She could have used more time to compose herself, to decide where they were all going from here—herself and Gary and Lee Cosford.

“Busy while I was away?” Gary asked.

“As usual. How was London?”

“I enjoyed it.” This was not the whole truth. Gary was a good mixer—his job demanded it. As a salesman for a Montreal engraving house, calling on the production departments of ad agencies, he got on well with the men who could discuss the advantages of offset reproduction versus letterpress. But throw him in with the clever boys from the creative department and it wasn’t the same.

He was grateful for his free trip to England even though he knew he’d been asked only because somebody dropped out at the last minute. His engravings were the backbone of the prize-winning campaign, therefore some Samaritan had suggested filling the vacant seat with good old Gary. He had asked Anitra to come along but she refused, pleading too much going on at Lee Cosford Productions.

“I enjoyed London,” Gary repeated, “except for some of the brilliant conversation. My idea of hell is to be locked up for twenty-four hours with two copywriters, an art director, and an unlimited supply of booze. The drunker they get, the more they laugh. Only I can’t see the joke half the time.” Gary suspected that sometimes they derived their amusement from him. Not that he was a clod: his suit cost two hundred dollars, his shoes were shined, and he kept his hair trimmed. Maybe it was the haircut. The creative types either let their heads go altogether or had it styled and sprayed so they looked like Glen Campbell.

“Pay no attention to them,” Anitra said. She was pouring herself some coffee from the pot Gary had made when he came in. She looked good against the counter in slim denims made stylish by a gold belt. “Agency guys are all the same. They think they’re some kind of elite.”

“Elite. That’s the word. Everything is a put-down. You don’t dare tell them you enjoyed a movie—they’ll say it was commercial and leave you feeling stupid. To hear them, the girls going by are all dogs or hustlers, the food in the restaurant contains the ‘permissible level’ of rodent hairs, and the wine is sulphuric acid.”

“Kill-joys.”

“That’s the word for them. Kill-joys. If you have a sincere feeling you have to hide it or they’ll make it into a joke.”

"So you had a lousy time. At least it was free." Anitra studied her husband. Something was on his mind. He could never conceal enthusiasm—it shone from the large square face, the jaw set firm, the thick black hair neatly combed and gleaming with Vitalis.

"It was only two days and apart from the meals I was usually on my own." He was getting ready to tell her. "But there was a thing happened—I'm excited about it. It's as if . . ."

When Gary finished talking, Anitra could not understand what he was so worked up about. He had been watching late-night television in his hotel room and had turned on a talk show. The guest was the English actress Donna Dean, the sex symbol from the sixties, who was still pretty today but hugely overweight.

Anitra said, "And your idea is what? You want to ask her to be in a film about Mama Cass?"

"Not me. I can't ask her. A film producer has to ask her. But she'd be perfect—if you saw her, you'd know what I mean. She's blonde, of course, so she'd need a dark wig. But she has the same baby face as Mama Cass and that majestic build. She was even wearing one of those big tent dresses Cass used to wear—"

Anitra found it difficult to become interested. Years ago, she had enjoyed listening to The Mamas and The Papas and she had agreed with Gary in those days that the bell-like voice of Cass Elliott had a lot to do with the group's success. More recently, she had heard something about the young woman's untimely death, but nothing much about it had registered. "O.K., there could be a film in it," Anitra said. "What's it got to do with you?"

"I'm the one to make it happen. I've got to do it."

After watching the Donna Dean interview, Gary had left the hotel and gone for a walk along Bayswater Avenue. It was midnight. Hyde Park was on his right, substantial white Edwardian buildings on his left. Ahead loomed Marble Arch and Park Lane with its lineup of hotels far posher than the one he was inhabiting. Noisy little cars, square black taxis, and an occasional red double-decker bus kept up a continuous roar beside him, but Gary hardly heard the traffic.

His mind was filled with music from the cassettes he used to play till they nearly fell apart, the songs of dreams and of young girls coming to the canyon.

According to the newspapers, Cass Elliott had died in a hotel some-

where near there. They said she choked to death on a sandwich alone in her room.

"I have to get the film going," Gary told his wife. "And now. Something tells me it's important."

"If you say so."

"Your boss said once that a feature film will never happen unless somebody puts all his energy behind it. There are too many other ideas competing for the funds and the facilities."

"Lee should know."

"Right. So I thought you might lay it on him tomorrow."

"Me? It's your idea." The last two days at Lee's place had given Anitra a shaking up. Some change in the relationship had been coming for a long time. But now she felt uncertain about her future and the sensation was distasteful to her. From the time eight years ago when she organized her marriage to Gary, Anitra had kept uncertainties to a minimum. The false pregnancy was a cheat but it got her out of a dismal situation at home. And it had done Gary no harm; he was forever testifying that the unexpected marriage had stabilized his life.

Now, for the sake of some excitement, she had gone with Lee Cosford. The event was satisfying enough as it was happening, but when they parted there had been a distant look in Lee's pale eyes and Anitra was no fool.

"You'd better describe the idea to Lee yourself," she said. "I wouldn't do it justice." It would kill her to approach him with this loony request, as if she thought he owed her something.

"Just mention it. Set it up for me."

"You're a big boy, Gary. You know his number. Call him and tell him you've got a business proposition. Lee Cosford would rather talk business than anything."

Lee Cosford, rotund and dynamic, rolled out into the waiting room and took Gary by the arm. "Stranger," he said, laughing, eyeing Prime anxiously, "where've you been keeping yourself? Come in and sit down. Stephie, make us a couple of coffees, will you?"

The idea sounded even better to Gary as he described it in Lee Cosford's panelled office, taking pulls at a huge mug of coffee, squinting against sunlight streaming through the window past the spire of a church on lower Mountain Street. Cosford lay back in his leather recliner, boots

on the glass desk, eyes closed like a man in a barber chair. As Gary finished, the bells in the tower across the street began to peal. He thought it was a good omen.

Cosford opened one eye. "Is that it?"

"That's it, Lee."

The film producer sat up. "I think it's a sensational idea."

"Really?"

"Fabulous. And you've probably heard Anitra mention I want to get into feature films. You can't know how soul-destroying it is producing thirty-second pieces of film to sell detergent or sausages. Or maybe you *do* know. You have the same assignment in print."

"I know what you mean." Actually, Gary was proud of the engravings his firm produced.

"The trouble is," Cosford said, "there are too many good film ideas chasing too little money. You just can't get the financing."

"I thought there was this Canadian Film Development Council. Don't they put up money?"

"That's right." Cosford put his knees under the desk and folded his arms precisely on the cold glass. This square individual in the overpressed suit had managed to brief himself. "The CFDC will, on occasion, back a good idea."

"And this is more than a good idea, Lee. It's a great idea."

"Right." Cosford's mind was working fast. He was more than ready to see the last of Gary Prime. "But there's only one way to approach the Council. They have to see a treatment."

"Treatment?"

"Right." Cosford picked up his telephone, consulted a page of names and numbers, and began to dial. "A scenario—an outline of what the film is going to be about."

"Can't we just put the idea down in a letter?"

"No, it has to be professionally done. And I've got just the man to do it." Cosford straightened up and smiled into the phone. "Hello, Lucas? Did I wake you? Lee Cosford. Fine, how are you? Luke, facing me across my desk is a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed fellow named Gary Prime who happens to have a sensational idea for a feature film. The idea is so good, the only person to do the treatment is Lucas Pennington."

After Gary Prime went away with an appointment to see Pennington at his apartment that afternoon, Lee Cosford wandered through a maze

of corridors till he came to a small room where his film editor was seated at a Steenbeck machine with Anitra Prime at his shoulder. They were peering into the frosted glass screen at the image of a child holding a doll. The editor spun the film backward, then forward again so that the child kissed the doll while Anitra clicked her stopwatch.

"I just had your husband in. Thanks for not warning me."

"I would have guessed next week. He's quick off the mark all of a sudden."

"Never mind. I got rid of him."

"He's sincere about the idea."

"I have twenty-five sincere ideas for feature films. Nine of them are my own." Cosford opened a window and spat out into a laneway three floors below. He watched the spittle float down to disappear on grey pavement. "I sent him to Lucas Pennington to get a treatment done."

The bald-headed man at the editing machine laughed.

"Who's Lucas Pennington?" Anitra asked.

"Before your era. Once a good copywriter, now a professional drunk. He's a freelance with loads of free time. Which is another way of saying the agencies are tired of Pennington missing deadlines."

Anitra said, "It sounds like a dirty trick, Lee." She frowned at her stopwatch; she was having no end of trouble making the product shot time out properly.

"It's dirty but effective. It gets Gary off my back while he and poor old Luke use up a year pretending they're writing a movie."

It was half past two when Gary showed up at Lucas Pennington's place on Bleury Street. The apartment was located up a flight of uncarpeted stairs above a tavern and a shop that sold sneezing powder and rubber excrement. When he heard the knock, Pennington put the gin bottle and his glass out of sight—not because he was an inhospitable man, but because there was barely enough for himself. He left magazines, newspapers, open books, soiled clothing, empty food tins, and soft-drink bottles where they were and went to the door.

With his guest inside and seated, Pennington performed a humanitarian act; he opened a window.

Gary looked at the man who was supposed to write his Mama Cass treatment. To recommend this one, Lee Cosford had to be crazy. Pennington managed to be gaunt and sloppy at the same time. He seemed

somewhere in his fifties—large head, patchy grey hair on a scalp that was scabby in places, apologetic eyes, and a smile that was choreographed to cover bad teeth. He had shaved a couple of days ago and had cut himself doing it.

“O.K. All right now. Right.” He was rummaging around the room, not looking at Gary, sounding like a nervous infielder at the start of his final season. “Tell me about this picture of yours.”

As Gary described his visit to London, his television glimpse of Donna Dean, and the flash of inspiration that led him to cast her in the role of his favorite singer, Pennington, who had discovered a notebook and a pen, lay on the floor with his head and shoulders against the baseboard, his eyes closed.

“So if Dean would agree to do it, and if we could get the right to use the original recordings for her to mime, the way the singers all do on TV these days,” Gary concluded, “I think we could have a good film.”

Pennington rolled sideways onto his elbow, cupping his cheek in one hand. He bit the cover off the felt-tipped pen he was holding, spat it away, and began flipping the pages of the notebook to find a clean one. They were all filled with indecipherable scrawl. At last he settled for half of the inside back cover. “Brilliant. Solid gold,” he said as he tried to make marks with the pen. “Put me in, coach. Let me work on this one.”

“You mean it?”

The writer turned his eyes up to Gary and they looked different—they looked angry and hungry, the apologetic wetness all gone. Pennington was feeling an old, almost-forgotten sensation, the one he used to experience in his first agency job when the new assignments came in and he couldn’t wait to dazzle the copy chief and the account supervisor and the client with another brilliant idea. Quite often he would deliver a winner. Then it was cover the table with beer and how about a little more money for young Luke before Y&R lures him away with shares.

“I mean it all right,” Pennington said. “You’re onto a sure thing, my son. Mama Cass—that voice, the way she used to raise her hand and give that little half-salute as the song began to swing . . . I want to weep.” The pen refused to write and, after tearing holes in the cover, he threw pen and notebook against the wall, struggling to his feet like a crippled, pregnant camel.

“The tragedy of her death.” Pennington was pulling magazines and files from a buried tabletop, uncovering a typewriter. He used an ankle

to drag a wooden chair into place, sat down, and cranked a crumpled letter around the roller, using two fingers to begin typing on the back of the paper. "What a career she had. Cass Elliott—there *has* to be a movie about her. And I know what you mean about the English broad to play the role. She's almost Cass's double. And she'll do a hell of a good job—never mind the silly parts they gave her in the sixties. She's a pro, a trained actress."

Pennington's typing was erratic. The keys kept sticking together in bunches and he cursed as he clawed them away from the paper. He squinted at what he had done: "This ribbon is dead. It's a ghost. Can you read that?"

Gary leaned over his shoulder, holding his breath. "Just barely."

"Never mind, it's coming, old son, the words are coming and I'll hammer the bastards down. Cosford knows my situation. He'll make a dark photostat of this and enlarge it three times." Pennington managed to hit several keys without an overlap and he laughed out loud. "The old rhythm," he said. "Once you've got it, you never lose it."

"Can I do anything to help?" Gary asked, delighted with this crazy old writer's reaction to his idea.

"Yes. Get out of here and let me work."

Two days later, Lucas Pennington showed up in the reception room of Lee Cosford Productions. The girl behind the board blinked at the sight of the very tall man in his dusty suit. It was a three-piece blue serge—not this year's model, not this decade's. At the top of it, above the frayed grey collar and badly knotted tie, was a wet, crimson face looking as if the man had just shaved it with a broken bottle. At the bottom, stepping forward awkwardly across the deep-pile carpet, were astonishing leather thong sandals over patterned socks.

Lee Cosford came out to claim his visitor. In the office he offered gin and Pennington accepted, saying, "First since day before yesterday. How about that, temperance fans?"

Cosford knew this had to be about the Gary Prime project. He believed he had heard the end of it but now here was the top writer from a generation ago looking as if he had just seen a vision on the road to Ste. Anne de Beaupré. Cosford reached out and took the glass away from his guest and said, "Tell me, Luke. Before you dive back into the sauce. Is there a feature film in this Mama Cass thing?"

"Academy Awards. Cannes Festival. The idea is solid gold, my dear. I've been working for two days on the treatment without anything to drink but coffee and grapefruit juice. It's in this brown envelope, Lee old buddy, and what you had better do is line up tons of money and hire your cast and your director because *somewhere* there's a lucky man who is going to make the film of the year from this here scenario of mine."

Cosford handed back the drink. "I just wanted to hear you say it." He took the envelope and went to sit behind his desk. To himself he said, Always trust a sober Pennington. He drew a thick sheaf of typewritten pages from the envelope. "Wow, what did you do, write a shooting script?"

"Almost. I had to force myself not to. I even went out and invested in a ribbon and a box of paper." Pennington drew on the drink, then set it aside and looked out of the window at the church spire.

Cosford studied the title page. It said, "*Blues for Mama Cass*—a film drama with interpolated music. A Lee Cosford Production written by Lucas Pennington." The script had weight in Cosford's hands; it felt crisp and substantial—he knew the heft of valuable work. He flicked the title page over and saw the beginning of the treatment. The writing flowed. It was vintage Pennington.

The producer glanced up, wondering whether he should mention the fact that Gary Prime's name did not appear on the script. He decided to let it go for the moment.

"Do you want up-front money, Luke," he asked, "or would you rather take a share of the gross?"

Pennington made growling noises in his throat as he rubbed his hands together. "Some of each, please," he said and, out in the reception area, Stephie heard through the wall the deep, nasty sounds of her boss and his visitor laughing.

Gary told Anitra how his project was going. He enthused over the meeting with Lucas Pennington, describing what a wash-out the man seemed to be, then how he came alight when the idea was explained. Aware of Pennington's bad reputation, knowing it was all a ploy to fob Gary off with a loser, Anitra was tempted to warn her husband not to expect too much. But why come on as a pessimist? Let the man have his dream for a while longer. Besides, you never could tell—something *might* come of it.

It was only by accident that she discovered a few weeks later that something was indeed coming of the Mama Cass project. Anitra encountered Stephie at the photocopy machine and happened to see that she was running off several copies of what looked like a shooting script. A glance at the title page and Anitra was off to see Lee Cosford almost at a run.

Then she slowed down, thinking, and stopped. The film business ground on at a steady pace at the best of times. No mad rush. She would wait and see what was going to happen next.

What happened was that Lee announced he was flying to London on business at the beginning of the week. He asked Stephie to book a couple of seats on the Air Canada flight for Sunday evening. If the other seat was for Gary, Anitra told herself, her husband would have been crowing before now. If it was for her, Lee would have said something. Instead, he was keeping his head down these days, acting as if he had done a sloppy job of picking her pocket and hoped she wouldn't mention it.

Anitra decided to bring up the subject as she sat in the front seat of Lee's car driving back from the Eastern Townships where they had been filming a butter commercial. She was never so grateful for a safety belt as when she drove with Lee Cosford. The highway was fairly clear and he kept pushing the accelerator. The needle edged past eighty-five, ninety.

Suddenly the steering wheel began to shudder in Lee's hands. He straightened his arms, reducing speed. "Second time it's done that." He swore a couple of times but his eyes were bright. He was enjoying himself. "Something is wrong with this car, my dear. Anything over ninety and she tries to run away from me."

Anitra stopped bracing her feet against the floor and tried to relax, her heart still racing. "Lee," she said, "what the hell are you up to?"

"I like to drive fast," he said.

"I mean with Gary's idea. I saw the treatment Pennington wrote. You're getting ready to run with it."

"Luke says it has potential. He may be a lush but Pennington has judgment."

"But why isn't Gary's name on the front page? Why doesn't he even know you're going ahead?"

"He will, he will—don't worry about it. As soon as I get my financing organized I'll write Gary a nice check."

"Thanks very much. Good thing I brought it up."

Cosford glanced at her and back at the road. The speedometer crept upwards and a feathery vibration in the steering wheel tickled his fingers. "Anitra, you know the film business. Let's face it, your husband is just an engraver's rep. What does he know from films? This is a Lee Cosford Production. It has to be if it's going to work." He glanced over again and this time he encountered her eyes staring straight at him. It was a frightening sight. "Come on! Gary fluked on an idea that happens to have possibilities. O.K., we're going to pay him for it. But the business of making it into a film is for me and Luke Pennington. And for you—you can be part of this too."

They drove a mile or two in silence.

Then he said breezily, "Want to come to London? Lucas and I are flying out on Sunday night to see the agent of this actress. Come along if you want. We could have some fun." He took a hand from the wheel and reached for hers.

Anitra drew her hand away and busied herself finding her lipstick and a small mirror in her purse. She concentrated on touching up her mouth. "I don't think so, Lee." She drew neat outlines with a tiny brush. "And don't pretend you'll miss me. Shacking up was fun, wasn't it? But I guess once was enough." She snapped her purse shut and turned to look at him coldly. "Right?"

He drew his shoulders up like a man in a hailstorm. "Whatever you say," he said patiently.

Gary came home that night in a mellow frame of mind. One of the agencies had been saying goodbye to a retiring account supervisor and good old Smitty had invited the representative of his favorite engraving house to stay for a drink. Gary let himself in at seven o'clock and was genuinely surprised to find Anitra in the living room with an empty salad plate beside her, a wineglass in her hand, and a news analysis program on television with the sound turned off. "Hello," he said. "No editing tonight? No answerprints? No emergency at the lab?" He said this without malice.

"You sound happy."

"We just put Elgar Smith out to pasture. They made nice advertising men in those days."

"There's a salad plate for you in the fridge."

"Thanks." His smile was that of a man who's been told his lottery ticket is a winner for the third consecutive week. He came back from the kitchen with his plate and a wineglass. Anitra poured Riesling for him as he peeled off the cling-film. "Hey, you made tuna with onions." He began eating hungrily.

Anitra reached forward and switched off the TV picture. "What's the word on your film idea?" she asked.

"Early days. I suppose Pennington's working on the treatment."

She set her glass down dead center on a coaster on the broad arm of the sofa. "Luke Pennington has delivered a thirty-page outline to Lee Cosford. They're very excited about it. They have an appointment with an agent in London for next Monday."

Gary beamed and raised his glass. "Fabulous. Thanks for telling me."

"You might well thank me. I don't think Lee was going to mention it." When her husband went on eating, she said, "I saw the script. Your name isn't on it."

"So?"

"So Lee Cosford is running away with your idea, Gary. He fobbed you off on Pennington to get rid of you, and now that Luke says the idea's solid gold Lee has adopted it."

"That's what I wanted."

"I don't believe this. Lee told me he's going to write you a check once the financing is arranged."

"All donations gratefully received." Gary looked closely at his wife and for the first time saw the extent of her rage. "It's what I wanted," he repeated. "A film about Mama Cass—something to really do her justice. The idea hit me in London when I was walking at night, as if she was still there, her spirit . . . I know that sounds stupid. But an idea is something from your soul, isn't it? That's all it is and who knows what makes the idea spring into your mind?"

"Gary, come down to earth."

"The film is all that matters. If it's going to be done, I'm delighted. No big deal if my name isn't connected with it."

"But it's *your* concept, damn it! You've *got* to be credited! Call a lawyer tomorrow and explain what's happening. Have a stop put on Lee before he goes any further." Her husband's satisfied face enraged her. "At least get mad! They're ripping you off, they're treating you like a retarded child."

"I can't get mad. I'm too happy."

Anitra picked up the wine bottle but her hands were shaking so hard she could not pour. Her empty glass toppled over. She left it rolling on the carpet. Gary was staring at her now, one cheek full. "Then maybe you'll get mad at this," she said. "While you were over in London falling in love with the ghost of Cass Elliott, I was back here in bed with Lee Cosford. Yes, that's right." She got up and said over her shoulder as she left the room, "Now will you come back into *this* world, Gary?"

Anitra found it easy to make her decision the next day. Her mind was influenced by the way the men around her seemed determined to conduct business as usual. Gary did his typical early-morning flit to work, leaving one of his screwy notes on the kitchen counter. Years ago he had played with the idea of being a cartoonist; now the talent had mostly evaporated, leaving a residue of doodled heads and neat printing. Today's note referred only obliquely to last night in a speech balloon that said, "Don't blame yourself. We'll talk."

At the studio, Cosford scurried around in his characterization as Laughing Lee the benign executive. He had everybody around the place grinning, but the best Anitra could give him was a sour, knowing smile. His only direct communication with her was when he whipped into her office and said, "Do me a favor, will you, Anitra? Stephie is away sick or I'd ask her. Drive the car around to the garage and have them check the steering. Tell him about the shudder around ninety. And I'll need it by Sunday."

"I'll call and see if they can do it now," Anitra said curtly. She picked up the phone and dialed for an outside line. But when Lee left the office she set the phone down again without making the call. The suggestion in her mind was unthinkable, but she had to consider it. She did so and came to the conclusion that Cosford had something coming. Not that an accident would happen. But if it did there would be justice in it.

Later, Cosford had to go to a luncheon meeting at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, so he took a taxi. He telephoned from there to say that he was accepting a lift with his dairy client down to the farm in the Eastern Townships. He would be there for the weekend, returning Sunday at midday to get the car and the film scenario from his office and then to drive Luke Pennington to the airport. Would Anitra be able to come in for an hour on Sunday to discuss taking over the reins during his absence?

"Of course." She pursued her curt manner, words at a premium. "They kept the car at the garage but promised the steering will be fixed by Saturday afternoon. I'll see that it's here."

"You're a gem." Lee was expansive after his lunch. "I'll bring you back something nice from Bond Street."

On Sunday morning as Anitra was leaving for the studio, Gary came out of the guest room where he had been sleeping for a couple of nights. "Have you got a minute to talk?" he said.

"I'm in a hurry."

"I've decided you're right. I'm going to see a lawyer next week. As long as the film is being made, I might as well get some credit."

He was not looking directly at her, so she was able to observe the veiled look on his face. "You still aren't mad, Gary. You're just saying what you think I want to hear."

His voice became petulant. "Well, how the hell am I supposed to please you?"

"Nobody's asking you for that. Just grow up. When somebody walks all over you, be a man—get mad."

He followed her to the door. "Are you going to see Lee?"

"I'm going to the studio. There's work to be done before he leaves for London."

When she was gone, Gary went into the living room and pressed the palms of his hands together. He looked around. Nothing like Sunday-morning light to show the dust on everything. Anitra liked to go about with a spray can and a cloth, making everything shine and smell of lemon. Lately there had been other things on her mind.

He took down the most-played cassette in his collection and slipped it into the tape deck. He turned on the amplifier, pressed START, heard a moment's silence and then the familiar harmony flowing from the speakers on the top shelf on either side of the fireplace—Mama Cass's huge, pure voice soaring over the others like a silver-belled horn.

At last he understood why Anitra was angry with him. It was a matter of expressing himself as unselfconsciously as the beautiful, natural woman he was listening to. Gary knew how he felt; he had to tell Lee Cosford how he felt.

By one o'clock, Anitra had made two big drinks each for Cosford and

Pennington. She had poured on the whisky for her boss and stinted the ginger. He was rolling with self-importance. She was glad when he looked at his watch.

"Time to hit the road," he said. "Where's the car, Anitra?"

"Around back." She had moved it there herself on Saturday. "The guy from the garage couldn't find anyplace else to park."

"Then we're off. Come on, young Lucas—Daddy is going to show you the world. So long, Mrs. Prime."

When the door closed behind them, Anitra poured herself a small drink and took it to Lee's desk where she sat down and rummaged till she found a copy of the Mama Cass scenario. Then she began to sip and read. As she turned the pages the realization dawned on her that this *would* make a great film. Gary was dead right. If things worked out, she and he would take it to another producer and have a go themselves.

Lee Cosford drove aggressively to the corner and stamped on the brake pedal, throwing Pennington forward so that he had to catch himself against the padded dashboard.

"Ride 'em, cowboy," Lucas said.

"Haven't lost a passenger in years." Cosford craned his neck. "Isn't that Gary Prime?"

"It sure looks like him."

"Roll your window down. Call him over."

"Are you sure? We don't need him at the moment."

"It's Sunday—I'm feeling Christian. Call him."

Gary saw the face at the car window, wandered over, and bent himself to look inside. "Hello, Lucas. Hello, Lee. I was coming to see you."

"I'm glad. I've been meaning to talk to you about your film. We're just off to the airport. Can you drive out with us and have a drink in the lounge? Don't hesitate, my boy—it's to your benefit. Get in."

As Gary went to open the back door, Lee whispered quickly to Pennington, "Let's give the guy a small credit and one or two percent. It's little enough and may save us litigation later on."

By two-thirty, Anitra had read the script twice and finished a second drink. When the telephone rang, she jumped. It was a police officer. There had been a crash on the highway near Dorval Airport. A car left the road and ran at top speed into a concrete abutment. The license

number had been put through the computer which printed out Lee Cosford Productions as owner of the car.

"That was my boss," Anitra said, sounding disturbed. "He was on his way to catch a plane. Is there any—"

"I'm sorry. He must have been going ninety. We haven't been able to get into the car yet, but there can't be anybody alive."

Anitra telephoned home but Gary was either out or not answering. She drove from downtown in twenty minutes, thinking about the accident she had programmed. If it wasn't murder it was certainly manslaughter. Not that Lee or Pennington were any great loss to the world, but she had better not let on to Gary that she had sent her boss out with two doubles on an empty stomach and faulty steering. Gary lacked the imagination to do anything but call the police.

The apartment was empty. Anitra checked the TV guide and saw that the Expos were on Channel Six in a doubleheader against the Phillies. That meant Gary would be down at the Mount Royal in the television lounge, drinking beer and eating peanuts. No supper required tonight. But perhaps they could have that talk he'd suggested this morning. No need for lawyers now—no bitterness, but a fresh start with an exciting project they could share.

The reaction set in as Anitra made tea. She was trembling so much as she carried it into the living room that she arrived with a brimming saucer. She set it down with both hands, went to turn on the radio, and noticed a cassette inside the deck. She pressed the proper switches and out came the voice Gary had been raving about for the past few weeks, the cause of all the excitement and the maneuvering and of her deadly intervention.

Now, as never before, she could understand what turned her husband on when this woman sang. Mama Cass was solo on this track, so vibrant and alive she might have been here in the room.

Anitra listened to the entire cassette—both sides—before she realized she was feeling impatient for Gary's return. She began willing him to abandon his precious baseball telecast and get in touch with her. And so when the telephone rang she ran to answer it eagerly.

The con game had begun in a slum hospital . . .

MISS NOBODY FROM NOWHERE

by
**MIGNON
WARNER**



Belinda stood at the bedroom window watching the old woman at work in the garden below. She had been with her for almost a year now and she still couldn't understand why, with all her money, she insisted on doing everything in the garden herself—like that hole she had been digging in the lawn and fussing over for the best part of a week. That was man's work. If she were really so worried that she couldn't trust someone else to do the job properly—she had explained, only that morning, how

if the hole for the new shrub wasn't dug deep and wide enough, and carefully squared instead of being left rounded, the roots would grow in a circle and choke themselves to death—then surely all she had to do was to stand over the workman while he did the job and insist that it was done the way she wanted.

It was a lovely garden, a delight to the eye and a testament to old Mrs. Freeman's determination to do everything properly—*her* way. Belinda had thought she had stumbled into paradise that first day. Ornamental fountains splashed into oyster-shell-shaped lily ponds; rare exotic plants and shrubs with unpronounceable Latin names bloomed and flourished wherever one turned; and beyond the folly, which always reminded Belinda of a giant iced wedding cake, was a truly splendid terraced rose garden and an arbor said to date back to medieval times.

Not forgetting the lilac, of course—Mrs. Freeman's favorite, her horticultural memorial to her daughter, planted there in pride of place in the lawn beneath Belinda's bedroom window by a mother's loving hand, that day sixteen years ago when her only child had run away from home.

Would she plant another lilac, or would the old one serve again? Belinda wondered.

She frowned. She should have known it would come to this. It was the only thing she remembered about her mother—her *real* mother, that is—her warning that sooner or later everyone had to pay her dues in life. But eighteen months ago, when she lay there in that hospital bed, not caring if she lived or died, this thought—the possibility, even, that the daring confidence trick Dr. Pelham had proposed to her would eventually lead to this—had never once entered her head. She had never really understood until this moment what her mother had meant by paying one's dues. And now it made her sick inside. Sick because, like the real Belinda—the long-lost daughter whom she, with Dr. Pelham's help, had been impersonating all these months—she too was going to walk out on the old lady and leave her high and dry. Without paying her dues.

She honestly hadn't meant it to finish this way. After what she'd been through—the degradation of that squalid East End squat where finally, having sunk as low as it was possible for a human being to sink, she had felt there was no way out for her but to end it all—Dr. Pelham's proposition had been her one last chance, a pinprick of light at the end of a long dark tunnel.

She sighed heavily. She remembered that day as if it were only yesterday: opening her eyes in the intensive-care unit, sure for a moment that she was dead—she felt too numb to be alive—and seeing Dr. Pelham's bulbous brown eyes peering into hers. Standing behind him was another white-gowned man—the registrar who had admitted her to the hospital late the previous night, she found out later. And it was he, she also discovered, who had alerted Dr. Pelham.

Quentin Pelham, it seemed, had been waiting for someone like her to come along for a very long while—years, in fact. Naturally, at that particular London hospital, situated where it was in the heart of the slums, there had been a plentiful supply to choose from: young single women of no fixed abode with no job, family, or friends—human flotsam and jetsam. But until she had turned up, more dead than alive, never quite exactly what Pelham had been looking for. And she had all those things plus the one absolutely essential requirement—an appendectomy scar on the left lower abdominal quadrant.

Like Belinda Freeman, she had everything on the “wrong” side, from her heart through to the vital appendix which the Freeman heiress had had removed at roughly the same time of life, when she was about eight years old.

Pelham had then whisked her—Belinda II—off to that ultra-expensive nursing home *cum* health farm deep in the Hampshire countryside supervised by his rather sinister-looking friend, Dr. Sinclair. Between the two they had healed her both mentally and physically and then groomed her for her big starring role.

She hadn't really thought she would be able to go through with it. Once she actually met the old lady face to face she was sure the game would be up. Mrs. Freeman was bound to see through the deception. But when that time finally came, Mrs. Freeman had been so anxious to believe that she was her beloved long-lost daughter that it was like taking candy from a small child.

That was what hurt now. Domineering and all as Mrs. Freeman undeniably was, she had grown really fond of the old girl. It seemed so cruel to do this to her. She couldn't care less about Pelham and Sinclair. Oh, they were furious with her after all the time and money they'd invested in her, but there was nothing they could do about it—no way they could stop her going off to the Middle East with Roddy. They couldn't blow the whistle on her without incriminating themselves. And

anyway, since she—Belinda—had come back into Mrs. Freeman's life the old girl had gotten much better and stronger. Every day new vitality seemed to be coming into her. She was a different person—alive again, vibrant with good health. It could be years and years now before she died, not the few months Pelham had been banking on; before Pelham and Sinclair saw any return for their investment. And the longer the wealthy old widow remained alive, the greater the risk that the real Belinda would suddenly turn up on her mother's front doorstep. Even Pelham, this last month or so, had started to worry about that. . .

Abruptly Mrs. Freeman straightened up; then, with arms akimbo, she stretched her aching spine. Turning, she glanced up at the house, spied Belinda watching her, and smiled and waved.

Belinda sighed. Well, it was now or never. She had promised Roddy she would do it today. She more than half suspected that Mrs. Freeman knew it was coming. Several times this past week she'd caught the old lady watching her with a sad, thoughtful look in her eye, as if only too well aware, as mothers often are, that Belinda was getting up the courage to tell her something they both knew she would rather not hear.

Belinda looked slowly around the room at the elegant canopied four-poster, the mirrored wardrobe doors behind which were more clothes and shoes than Julie Metcalfe—Miss Nobody late of Nowhere—would have imagined anyone could possibly need, not even in a dozen lifetimes. The whole wide world had opened up to her when she, as Belinda Freeman—Miss Somebody of Somewhere Special—had stepped from the hired chauffeur-driven limousine onto the imposing porch of this big, beautiful house. Anything and everything she wanted that money could buy could be hers for the asking. Except for one thing, of course: the reason the real Belinda had fled the gilded cage as soon as she had turned eighteen—her freedom.

Pelham, to give him his due, had warned her about this. If she left the old lady, like Belinda had, it would be the rags-to-riches story in reverse. And just as sudden. She would be back in the gutter so fast she wouldn't know what had hit her.

She had sworn to him that it would never happen. No way could she let it happen. She was thirty-four years old, a failed actress—ex-you-name-it-she'd-been-it-and-done-it! She wasn't *that* stupid!

Or was she?

She smiled faintly. In a word, yes. And the reason for her stupidity—her

excuse, if you like—was Roddy Lloyd. He had come to the house with some papers for Mrs. Freeman to sign. That was how they'd first met, and now he too was breaking out of the Freeman cage, leaving the firm of solicitors that employed him and going out to the Arabian Gulf as a legal adviser to one of the oil companies there. Taking Belinda with him.

She turned and went out of the room, then walked slowly down the stairs to the drawing room. She paused at the door and took a deep breath. Mrs. Marsh, the housekeeper—dressed for the street—glanced up at her coldly, then finished explaining to Mrs. Freeman that she expected to be away from the house for no more than an hour and a half. Then, ignoring Belinda completely, she excused herself and went out.

Mrs. Marsh had been deliberately cold and offhand with her all week, confirming Belinda's suspicion that the housekeeper was working hand-in-glove with Pelham and Sinclair and was as put out over her proposed defection as they were.

Mrs. Freeman was pouring tea from a silver tea service. "Ah, there you are, my dear," she said in a soft, surprisingly tremulous voice which belied her immense strength of character and purpose. "I was wondering where you'd got to. Come and drink your tea while it's hot."

There was a smile in the old lady's shrewd blue eyes as she offered the cup and saucer to the younger woman. "You'll be pleased to know the ground is finally ready to receive the new shrub Mrs. Marsh has just informed me was delivered only a few minutes ago. See—" She held out a narrow white plastic tag that Mrs. Marsh, Belinda supposed disinterestedly, had removed from the shrub on its delivery.

"I think," Mrs. Freeman continued, slipping on her spectacles to read what was printed on the tag, "I'll plant it in a little while—get it settled in its new home."

"Don't you think you've done enough for today?" said Belinda, stepping back with her tea to sit on the sofa opposite Mrs. Freeman. "It's getting late—it's nearly four. Why not wait until tomorrow morning and get Mrs. Marsh to give you a hand? It really is too much for you on your own, and it's no use my offering to help. You know how hopeless I am at gardening. I'm bound to do something wrong and make you cross."

Mrs. Freeman raised her cup to her lips and smiled. "You look a little pale, Belinda," she observed. "You really should get more fresh air. Is anything the matter?"

Belinda frowned. "Mrs. Freeman," she said, very deliberately. "No

more of that "Mother" nonsense. "There's something I have to say to you—a confession I want to make."

Mrs. Freeman sipped her tea. "Drink up, my dear," she said, nodding her head at Belinda's untouched tea. "It's getting cold." Belinda obediently did as she was told.

"That's a good girl," said Mrs. Freeman approvingly. "I can see the color coming back into your cheeks already."

Belinda cradled her cup and saucer in her lap and gave the older woman an earnest look. "Please listen to me, Mrs. Freeman," she said urgently. "You must let me get this off my chest."

The old lady cocked an inquiring eyebrow at her. "Yes, of course." She regarded her thoughtfully. "What is it, Belinda?"

The young woman made an impatient gesture with her hand. "That's just it. I'm *not* Belinda! My name is Julie Metcalfe. Dr. Pelham found me in a London hospital after I'd tried to commit suicide. He—" She paused, considered the old lady carefully. She was drinking her tea calmly as if she hadn't heard a word. "*Mrs. Freeman!* Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, my dear," she replied imperturbably. "You were telling me you're not Belinda." She paused and thought for a moment. "Julie, you said? A pretty name; it suits you."

"You don't seem very shocked," observed Julie, puzzled.

"No?" Mrs. Freeman nodded between sips of tea. "Perhaps that's because I've always known you weren't Belinda."

Julie gave her a startled look. "How—how did you know? You hadn't seen your daughter for ages—sixteen years—and Dr. Pelham said I was a perfect match. Not to begin with, of course, but by the time he'd finished with me. He was so thorough—" she frowned—"there's no way you could've known that I wasn't her."

The old lady was smiling gravely, still nodding. "But there is, my dear. You and dear Dr. Pelham made one silly, careless little mistake in your otherwise most convincing impersonation of my daughter."

Julie flushed a dull red. She spoke resentfully. "How long have you known?"

"From the beginning," said Mrs. Freeman calmly.

"Then why did you let it go on for as long as this?" Julie demanded. "Why did you let us deceive you?"

Mrs. Freeman sipped her tea for a few moments. Then she said quietly, "Because it suited me, my dear. I am a very lonely old woman, Belinda;

I can afford to indulge my fantasies. I've no quarrel with the arrangement."

"I'm not Belinda!" snapped Julie. She sighed. Then, contritely: "I—I want to apologize. I owe you that much. I'll pay you back every penny—"

"And just how do you propose to do that, my dear?" inquired the old lady, her shrewd eyes narrowing.

Julie moistened her lips nervously. "Roddy—Mr. Lloyd—and I are going to be married. Next Saturday. It's all arranged. We leave for Bahrein on Monday."

"I see." Mrs. Freeman nodded her head. "Mr. Lloyd, I take it, is fully cognizant with this deception of yours?"

"No." Julie frowned quickly. "No, of course not. He had nothing to do with it."

"And yet you expect him, your husband-to-be, to reimburse me on your account? I presume that is your plan." Mrs. Freeman smiled faintly, then shook her head. "No, my dear. There are some debts that one simply must pay oneself."

Julie bit her lip. "I—"

"Finish your tea, Belinda," said Mrs. Freeman firmly. "Then you must come out with me and help me plant my *Syringa vulgaris*."

Julie frowned. The room seemed very hot and stuffy all of a sudden, and there were two Mrs. Freemans. The young woman rubbed a hand quickly across her eyes but they were still there, both of them smiling at her.

"*Syringa vulgaris*," she mumbled, her speech becoming slightly slurred. "What's that?"

The two Mrs. Freemans spoke softly. There was a faraway look in their eyes. "It was lilac time when Belinda was born, and lilac time when she left."

Julie struggled to her feet, took an unsteady step forward, reached out blindly. Both Mrs. Freemans were becoming fuzzy, drifting away from her in a swirling grey mist. "*Mrs. Marsh!*" she screamed. Or did she? She wasn't sure, but she had certainly meant to call out to the housekeeper. Not that it mattered either way. Mrs. Marsh, she suddenly remembered, had gone out, wouldn't be back for an hour or more. She was alone, alone in the house with this horrible *horrible* old woman!

Julie's hands flew to her throat and she swayed on her feet. "*You—you killed her!*" she croaked, choking. "That's how you knew I was a fraud!

You killed your own daughter when she told you she was going to leave you!" Julie's eyes were stark with horror. "Oh, my God! I can see it all now! Belinda's out there, isn't she? In the garden, buried under the—"

Her right hand fell away from her throat and clutched at the lace-edged cloth covering the table as her body arched convulsively and she pitched forward onto the carpet at the old woman's feet. Something fluttered to the floor with her—the identification tag belonging to Mrs. Freeman's new shrub, the one she was waiting to plant. *Syringa vulgaris*. The common lilac.

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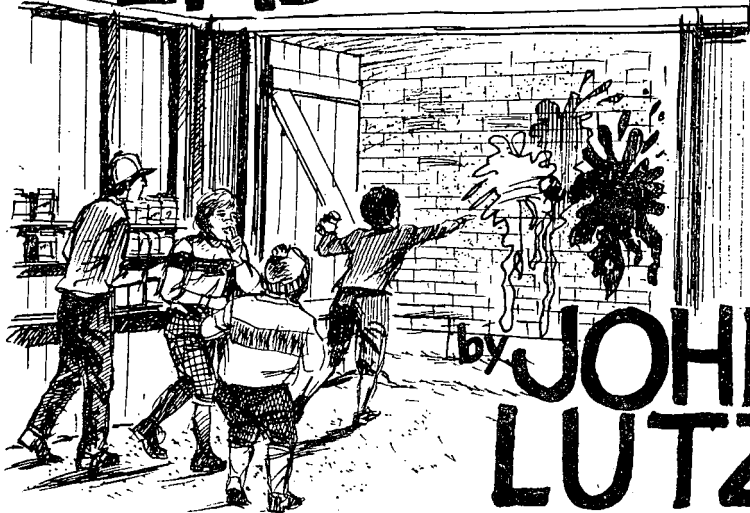
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HOA365

The others called Wilson a coward . . .

UNTIL YOU ARE DEAD



by **JOHN LUTZ**

The glass jars of enamel added to the colorful, formless composition that was being created as one by one they exploded against the brick wall. Wilson Benton was smiling as he picked up each jar and hurled it with the conscienceless exuberance of a mischievous seven-year-old.

Mrs. Hefferman, whose hobby was the making of ceramic pots, mugs, praying-hand plaques, and the like, kept her brightly colored enamels on a dusty shelf in the garage. Usually the garage door was closed and

locked. But not today, when Wilson happened by, spotted the neat row of jars, looked at the wide expanse of brick wall on the other side of the alley, and surrendered to the temptation.

"What do ya think you're doin'?"

The voice belonged to Randy Hefferman, Mrs. Hefferman's twelve-year-old nephew who lived with her. With Randy were Bob Rourke, a gangly boy of ten who was the best ballplayer in the neighborhood, and Frankie Toller, an overweight and overbearing eleven-year-old who nurtured a developing skill at instigating trouble among others while remaining outside the fray.

There wasn't much that Wilson could say to Randy's indignant question. Wilson had, almost literally, been caught red-handed. He stood silently, a frail, dark-haired boy with wide and fearful brown eyes that took in the older and heftier Randy with morbid apprehension. The glass jar containing Chinese red dropped from his suddenly sweating hand to shatter at his feet and join the shards of broken glass in the cobblestoned alley.

"He broke the lock on the garage an' got that stuff an' smashed it," Frankie Toller said accusingly.

Wilson swallowed. "I didn't!" he choked.

Randy moved a menacing step closer to him. Wilson could smell his breath; he'd been eating the hot chili his aunt often made. "Didn't what?" Randy asked.

"Break into the garage!"

"Then how'd you get all my aunt's paint jars an' break 'em up?"

"The door was open! It was!"

"She always locks it," Frankie Toller remarked.

Bob Rourke stood silently staring at Wilson. He was only vaguely interested in what was going on, but he would go along with whatever Randy and Frankie decided to do to the trapped and unquestionably guilty Wilson.

Randy moved still nearer and Wilson's throat went dry. A coppery corruption of fear lined the sides of his tongue.

"Ain't no reason to break all that stuff just 'cause the door was open," Randy said. His hand pistoned out, pushing Wilson backward, broken glass crunching loudly beneath the soles of his tennis shoes.

"What we gonna do to him?" Frankie asked eagerly. "Can't let him get away with it."

"Tell your aunt," Bob Rourke suggested to Randy.

"Naw, she won't do nothin'," Frankie said. "Besides, we ain't snitches."

Randy's cool grey eyes flared with sudden inspiration. He placed his fists on his hips. "Take off your shoes," he said to Wilson.

Frankie grinned.

"He cuts up his feet through them socks and we'll get in trouble," Bob Rourke observed.

"He's the one in trouble," Randy said fiercely. "This'll teach him not to break into people's garages and bust up their stuff!"

"He'll cut himself," Bob Rourke repeated. "Anyway, he ain't gonna take off his shoes."

"If he don't, we'll make him!"

Wilson's hands were trembling. Frankie and Bob Rourke stepped closer to stand beside Randy. Wilson looked into Bob Rourke's narrowed eyes and knew he could expect no help from that direction.

"Now!" Randy demanded.

Wilson bent and removed his shoes.

"Now walk!" Randy demanded.

Wilson stared down at the glittering, multicolored fragments of glass.

"You heard Randy!" Frankie said.

Wilson took a step. Another. He felt the uneven pressure of the glass on the soles of his feet, threatening to break through the dirty cotton of his socks to imbed itself in his flesh. Gingerly, fearfully, he took light, carefully aimed steps, almost wishing that the jagged glass would penetrate the bottoms of his feet to create a pain that might alleviate the overpowering sense of shame that was enveloping him.

But finally he reached a clear spot beyond the broken glass. His feet were undamaged; the cotton socks had been enough protection. He stood staring at the three boys on the other side of the expanse of glimmering danger.

"See," Frankie told Bob Rourke, "he didn't even get cut." He sounded disappointed.

Randy was looking at Wilson with something like startled recognition. "He's a coward," he said gravely. "The guy's a coward." It was as if he'd heard about cowards but had never really expected to see one. And now here was one, standing directly in front of him. Not only that—it was someone he knew.

"He's a coward all right," Frankie agreed.

For a moment Wilson felt totally alienated from his world, as if it had unexpectedly come to his and everyone's attention that he had webbed feet. With one abrupt stroke he was separated from the rest of humanity.

"I—"

But the rest of humanity was no longer interested in anything he had to say. Its three representatives turned and walked away toward the mouth of the alley. Frankie glanced over his shoulder for just an instant, but no one else looked back. As they rounded the corner and disappeared, Bob Rourke gracefully leaped to slap the bottom of a rusty Coca-Cola sign protruding from the brick building. The metal sign twanged and continued to vibrate loudly.

Wilson stood for a long time, still holding his shoes in his right hand, staring at the bright world beyond the mouth of the alley. Then he shivered. That world would never be the same. He had been, if not a close friend, an occasional companion of the three boys who had just left him. But he was no longer one of them. He could never be one of them again.

Pearl Harbor had been bombed six months ago. When war had been declared, Wilson Benton, now twenty-six years old, had, in a patriotic fervor, attempted to enlist in the Army. A perforated eardrum and weak eyesight had caused him to be turned down and classified 4-F. Not knowing what else to do, he'd returned to his art studies.

Wilson was considerably talented as a painter in oils. His ambition was to be an illustrator; once, the art director of *The Saturday Evening Post* had given him encouragement in a long, friendly letter. Nature was Wilson's favorite milieu for his art, so with what savings he'd accumulated he leased a tiny clapboard cabin in a gently rolling, lush green area of the Ozark Mountains. He intended to spend the summer and part of the fall at the cabin painting. Then, with what he'd created, he would again approach the world of magazine illustration and try to establish a beach-head.

The cabin was a one-room affair with a sharply peaked roof. Though it wasn't equipped with electricity, it did have a septic tank and indoor plumbing. Wilson slept in a comfortable feather bed, cooked his meals on an old iron wood stove, and sat up nights listening to the Silvertone radio he'd hooked up to two six-volt car batteries.

Once a week he would drive into Colver, the nearest town, in his

UNTIL YOU ARE DEAD

dented grey '36 Chevy coupe and buy groceries to haul back in the trunk. Sometimes he would pull to the side of the narrow dirt road that led to the alternate highway and survey a particularly beautiful view, and return the next day to sketch or paint there. Primitive, yet with a deceptive, almost feminine loveliness that disguised nature's ongoing life-and-death struggle, the rolling green Ozark country was ideal for Wilson's purpose. He was content with what he was accomplishing.

The cabin had a large window that provided northern light, but often during the day Wilson would set up his easel on the side of the wooden front porch and work outside. It was on one of those days that he heard the racketing bang and clatter of a car approaching the cabin along the seldom traveled dirt road. As he stepped down from the porch, he saw a haze of dust among the high branches of maples near the road's sharp bend; the car was very near.

It was a model A Ford, rusty, the top cut off, the engine exposed. One of the rear fenders was hanging half off and clanking against the car's body as the tall rubber tires bounced over the deep ruts.

When the driver saw Wilson he hit the brakes and the old Ford pulled to a squealing, rattling halt before the cabin. There were three men and a woman in the car, two of the men in the front seat. The man in the back was slouched sideways, his legs stretched across the woman's lap, his bare feet propped up on the glassless window frame. The cloud of dust raised by the car caught up with it and slowly settled in the brilliant sunlight.

"What you doin' at the Harris cabin?" the driver asked Wilson. He had blond hair and a scraggly beard that was more the result of neglecting to shave than a conscious attempt to grow chin whiskers. The other two men were dark-headed. The woman—or girl—was a brunette with a dirty face, freckles, large blue eyes, and lissome arms, one of which was flung carelessly across the back of the rear seat. None of them appeared to be more than twenty years old, and Wilson guessed the girl to be in her teens.

"I rented the cabin for the summer," Wilson said, moving closer to the car so he wouldn't have to shout. "My name's Wilson Benton."

The girl appeared puzzled. "What for would you rent a place like this?" she asked in a grating soprano voice.

"I paint. I like it here."

"Paint what?" the driver asked. He rubbed a hand across a long nose.

that had been broken many times. His pale grey eyes were set too close together, regarding Wilson with indifferent curiosity.

"Pictures. Some of them for magazine illustrations."

"Oh, that kinda paintin'," the girl said.

"Ain't that somethin'?" the man with her in the back seat spoke up. His lank hair was hanging in his eyes. He had a wide lantern jaw and was missing several front teeth. Wilson couldn't tell by the tone of his voice how he'd meant his remark.

The man on the front passenger's side, who would have been darkly handsome if he were clean and well dressed, grinned. "Don't mind 'em, Wilson," he said. "I'm Josh Edwards." He pointed to the driver. "Zach Wheelright. Them in the back is Bandy McCane and Maybelle Sue Dover."

"Lotsa pretty things around here to paint, all right," Maybelle said.

Bandy McCane gave a jut-jawed, broken-toothed sneer and peered at Wilson from beneath his unshorn hair.

"Ol' Bandy'd be jealous if you was to pose for Wilson, Maybelle," the driver, Zach, remarked.

"Don' matter," Maybelle said to Wilson with a perfect smile, and took in the other occupants of the car with a circular wave of her arm. "These'ns are all gonna be gone into the Army afore the end of summer."

"How come you ain't in?" Bandy asked. "You look to be of age."

"I tried," Wilson said. Unaccountably, he felt himself blushing. The change of his color wasn't lost on Bandy McCane.

"How hard you try?" he asked derisively.

"Hard enough," Wilson said. "They told me I was 4-F."

"Lotsa reasons you can be 4-F," Zach observed skeptically.

"Glad I ain't a reject," Josh said in a solemn voice. "Comes a time to fight, an' this is it."

Wilson nodded. "I agree."

"I'd like to see your pictures sometime," Maybelle said, blatantly changing the subject.

"No time now," Zach shouted, jamming the old Ford into gear and gunning protesting life into the clattering engine.

"No call for painters in this man's war!" Bandy shouted over his shoulder at Wilson as the Ford's big wheels dug into the earth without slipping and the car shot forward. Maybelle lifted an arm in a languid farewell that Wilson barely saw through the dust as the car disappeared beyond

the rise where the road gently curved.

Wilson walked back up onto the porch, listening to the measured hollow thunder of his boots on the warped planks as he strode to his canvas. The conversation with the four native Ozarkians had disturbed him more than it should have.

Two days later he returned after painting a landscape from high on a nearby bluff to find that the cabin had been broken into and many of his paintings had been slashed.

He stood staring at the disruption of the cabin's interior, unable to see clearly for a moment as an aching, helpless rage flared deep in his stomach, then gradually receded to a painful smoldering. So personal seemed the attack, it was as if the torn canvas were an extension of his own flesh.

After cleaning up and salvaging what he could of his materials, Wilson drove into Colver to see the local sheriff.

"Who knowed you was at the cabin?" Sheriff Bayne Haynes asked. He was a large man with a vast stomach paunch, beady, intelligent black eyes in a fleshy, mottled face, and a walnut-gripped .45 Colt revolver holstered to his hip. He was gazing at Wilson amiably from where he sat turned in his swivel chair to face away from the long rolltop desk against the office's far wall. His lean deputy, Rawly Krebs, slouched nearby against a dusty switchboard.

Wilson hesitated, then told the sheriff about his conversation with Josh, Zach, Bandy, and Maybelle.

"I don't know definitely that it was them," he added.

"They's good boys, but they do tend to act up," Sheriff Haynes said absently.

"Thass a fact," Krebs added.

"Anything exceptin' your paintin's broke up?" the sheriff asked.

Wilson thought about that. "No," he said finally. "A few things were knocked to the floor, furniture turned over, but nothing really broken."

Haynes rose from his chair with the ease and seeming lightness of an ascending hot-air balloon. There were wide, almost black perspiration stains beneath the arms of his tan uniform shirt. "Down the road a short piece from your cabin," he said, "is a cutoff to Ezekiel Ferber's place. Now, Ferber's got himself a phone. You have any more trouble you run on down there, use that phone to call here, an' me and Rawly'll be up to your place faster'n you can shout rabbit."

Krebs looked at Wilson and nodded his narrow pock-marked head. "Thass a fact."

"All right, fine," Wilson said. There didn't seem much else that could be done.

"If 'n it was who we figure, they had their fun an' ain't likely to come back. Thass the way they is, those three boys. Not mean—jus' too full a vinegar."

"As I said," Wilson emphasized, "I don't really know who it was. But I thought you should know that it happened."

Sheriff Haynes's bushy, greying eyebrows rose and fell like writhing caterpillars. "Oh, you did the right thing, an' no doubt about it." Deputy Krebs nodded silent agreement. Haynes licked his lips and squinted at Wilson. "You—uh—do anything to rile them boys? On accident, maybe?"

"I don't think so," Wilson said. And that was true. He hadn't done a thing. It wasn't his fault they were going into the Army and he was 4-F, or that Maybelle had seemed to take a shine to him. "I take it Maybelle is Bandy McCane's girl friend," he said cautiously.

The sheriff raised his expansive chin and smiled faintly. "You might say she's the girl friend of all of 'em, from time to time. Thass how it is sometimes here away from the city, Mr. Benton."

Wilson swallowed and nodded, imagining despite himself Maybelle's pale, languid arms and luminous blue eyes. Sheriff Haynes was staring hard at him.

Wilson thanked the sheriff and walked toward the screen door to the street.

"Things'll sure be quieter when them boys is gone to the Army," the sheriff remarked behind him.

"Thass a fact," Deputy Krebs said.

From the sheriff's office, Wilson walked directly across the street to Holfer's Service Center and General Store, a small frame structure with two gas pumps in front and a flat-roofed addition which stocked groceries and hardware. He noticed that the sheriff's '38 Dodge was at Holfer's, being worked on by a lanky, grease-stained young boy. The car was dusty black with large gold replicas of a sheriff's badge emblazoned on its doors. When Wilson entered the store he saw Zach Wheelright slouching at the counter paying for a package of chewing tobacco.

Zach turned, spotted Wilson, and grinned guiltily as he scratched at his sparse blond beard. He unwrapped the tobacco and slowly bit off a

large plug. Then, chewing laboriously behind his wide grin, he walked past Wilson and out the door. Wilson saw that he had a slender broken paint brush tucked behind his left ear.

For a moment Wilson wanted to return to the sheriff's office and inform Haynes of what he'd just seen. Then he decided against it. There was no point in further stirring up things if, as Haynes had predicted, the matter was over.

Wilson bought five dollars' worth of groceries to last him the week, loaded them in the trunk of the Chevy, and returned to the cabin.

That Friday, when he was working indoors near the cabin's north window, Wilson heard a scuffling sound on the front porch and felt his heart double-pump, then grow heavy with fear. He put down his brush and palette and walked softly to the door.

When he opened the door he found Maybelle standing on the porch alone.

"Tol' you I wanted to see your pictures," she said, smiling. She was wearing a low-cut grey blouse and a long skirt of material so thin that the outline of her compact body showed through. She was barefoot, and Wilson found himself involuntarily staring at the dusty neat squareness of her pale toes. "Ain't you gonna ask me in?" she said.

He raised his gaze to her eyes. *The girl friend of all of 'em from time to time*. "Sure," he said brokenly. He gave her smile back to her, amplified. "Come on in."

She seemed to be genuinely enthralled by his work, giving awed girlish exclamations as she examined the pastel landscapes, crying that she recognized most of the views before her on the canvas. Wilson brought up the subject of the vandalism that had occurred two days before and Maybelle seemed horrified. But she didn't deny the probable identity of the culprits. "Zach, Josh, and Bandy, I 'spect," she said, shaking her head in disdain.

She offered then to show Wilson a spot he might want to paint, and they left the cabin. Maybelle led him up the hill on the other side of the road, then down along a path to a clearing dotted with wildflowers in the tall wind-stirred grass. It was an exceptionally pastoral spot, though too flat and indistinctive to paint. Wilson didn't tell Maybelle this. She teased him, moving up against him as if by accident as they walked, letting the backs of her fingers barely brush his hand.

"The view from between those big pines is sure pretty," she said, pointing with Michelangelo's grace toward a patch of cloud-marbled blue framed by green branches.

Wilson trudged up the slight rise to the high point between the pines, studied the unspectacular view, then turned to ask Maybelle where, specifically, she meant for him to look.

Maybelle was gone.

A hollowness in Wilson's stomach seemed to fill with something dark and bitter. He began to walk, then run back toward the cabin.

When Wilson flung open the door and saw the wreckage a sob expanded to form a lump in his throat, then erupted from him in a frustrated snarl. This time the damage was worse—almost every canvas slashed, furniture ripped open, food pulled from cupboards and smashed or scattered. But worst of all, Wilson knew that Maybelle had made a fool of him; she had used herself as a diversion while the three men returned to the empty cabin. On the wall near the sink was scrawled "4-F" in Wilson's yellow oils. The blood rushed to his face as he whirled, slammed the door, and stomped noisily from the buckled wood porch.

He got into the Chevy and started the engine. He would drive down the road to Ezekiel Ferber's place as the sheriff had suggested, and phone for the law.

Wilson had pulled out onto the narrow road and traveled fifty feet before he knew something was wrong. The car was bouncing violently, swerving, and pulling to the right. He braked, turned off the engine, and got out.

The right rear tire was flat. Wilson kicked the misshapen rubber and pounded on the grey rounded slope of the car's fender. He would have to walk to Ferber's.

Then, bending down, he saw the wide slit in the tire's sidewall. It had been slashed.

But why only that tire? Could it be that his antagonists wanted him to think it was only an ordinary flat so he would walk to Ferber's? So they could return and do even more damage? Wreck anything they'd missed? Scrawl more messages? Perhaps even burn down the cabin?

Wilson opened the trunk of the car and got out the spare tire, the jack, and the X-shaped iron lug wrench. He could quickly change the tire, drive to Ferber's, and maybe phone the sheriff in time for him to get back up and catch the vandals in the act.

He jacked up the back of the car, loosened the lug nuts with the wrench, and fumbled with them, removing them the rest of the way by hand. Sweat was trickling down his face and tiny insects circled him, buzzing about his eyes and flitting at his mouth and nostrils. He wrestled the airless tire off the car and turned toward the spare.

Then he heard the unmistakable roar and clatter of Zach Wheelright's decrepit car approaching. He remained crouched behind the Chevy and peered over the fender to see traces of raised dust beyond the road's bend. The engine noise was loud; the car was almost upon him. They must think he had taken the path through the woods to Ferber's on foot and the cabin was again deserted.

— Then came the crash.

The surface of smooth metal before Wilson smashed into him as the Chevy was struck and bounced backward off the jack. There were startled cries, tinkling glass, and the hiss and trickling surrender of a broken radiator.

Wilson was on his hands and knees, fighting to catch his breath from the blow he'd received in the chest. Hazily he could see Zach, Bandy, Josh, and Maybelle tumble from the wrecked Ford. Zach sat down and held his head in both hands. Maybelle stood leaning dizzily against the side of the Chevy. Josh and Bandy were swaying, supporting each other. They had expected him to be gone, all right, Wilson realized. But they hadn't expected the crippled car to be jacked up in the middle of the road just beyond the bend.

"You wrecked my car!" Zach was saying, staring at Wilson from between splayed fingers vividly marked with blood. He cursed and struggled to his feet.

Josh and Bandy moved nearer to flank him, lending the threat of their presence to his words.

"You wrecked it!" Wilson managed to gasp.

"You come over here!" Zach screamed.

Wilson didn't move.

"Ain't you got ears?" Bandy asked. The initial shock of the accident had passed and although he was holding his injured left arm tight against his body, he was grinning. Josh seemed still woozy from when his head had struck the windshield. He was standing, swaying, with his fists on his hips.

Wilson sighed and began to rise.

"Not like that, you yellow coward scum!" Zach shouted. "Stay on your hands an' knees where you belong!"

Maybelle began to laugh.

Wilson stayed very still.

"We'll kill you if you don't," Josh said to Wilson. "Maybe we'll kill you if you do."

Wilson was paralyzed, breathing painfully as if each lungful of air were somehow thickened almost to liquid consistency. Fear was a thing alive within him, pulling marionette strings despite his humiliation.

He began to crawl.

Maybelle laughed again. They were all laughing now except Zach, who was staring with a thin, knowledgeable smile at Wilson.

Then Wilson's left hand was stung by one of the glass fragments from the shattered windshield and headlights. He paused.

"Keep comin'!" Zach warned.

Wilson's right hand came into contact with the lug wrench.

"You heard!" Bandy said, not laughing now. For emphasis he slapped his right hand hard against the loose fender of the Ford, causing the metal to twang and vibrate loudly.

Wilson didn't remember rising, but he had, still clutching the lug wrench. He surprised himself even more than the three men as he was suddenly before them, swinging the tire iron, hearing and feeling it smash the flesh and bone of Zach's skull. Arcs of bright blood glistened in the air. The injured Bandy tried to grab Wilson's arm. Wilson was too strong for that now—stronger than anyone had ever been. He brushed the clutching fingers aside, brought the wrench down behind Bandy's ear. Someone was clawing at Wilson's neck with sharp fingernails. Maybelle. He whirled, lashed out with the wrench that seemed weightless in his hand, then pursued Josh, who was trying to stagger around the rear of the Ford, and laid open his skull with one effortless swing. Then he returned to Bandy, who was sitting cross-legged on the ground before Maybelle's bloody body. Bandy started to beg with his eyes and distorted mouth. The shadow of the raised lug wrench fell upon him like a cross. The shadow grew. The wrench descended.

It was Ezekiel Ferber who came across the scene and fled home to phone the law. Sheriff Haynes and Deputy Krebs arrived within half an hour in the sheriff's dusty black car with the gold insignia on the doors.

The doors slammed in unison as Haynes and Krebs left the car to swagger toward where Wilson was sitting slumped on the Chevy's running board, the heavy lug wrench on the ground between his feet. The sheriff and his deputy paused.

Somewhere in a far, dark part of Wilson's mind he could feel himself spinning, falling in intermittent, sweeping plunges toward an inevitable timelessness.

"Gawd, Gawd, Gawd," the sheriff was saying, "he killed 'em all." His face was white as bone. "There weren't no reason whatsoever for this."

"Thass a fact," the deputy said in a soft, awed voice.

"Those are the facts," the prosecutor said.

"They're the plain facts," the jury foreman said.

"—Until you are dead," said the judge.

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The trouble started when the first body was found . . .

ASLIP OF THE LIP

by
**LAWRENCE
TREAT**



Harry Boswell, Detective Third Grade, was slow. He thought slow, talked slow, and moved slow. On the other hand, nobody had ever accused him of not being thorough.

Take music, for instance. He played the fife in the police band and the clarinet in his neighborhood chamber-music group. He could handle a trumpet, a sax, or a flageolet, and he could tell you right off the difference between a pommer and a bombard—if any. All of which bears more or

A SLIP OF THE LIP

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less on the triple murders of Bucconi, Santangelo, and Rodman.

Janet Boswell, however, was as quick as her husband was slow, and her approach to most matters was at the opposite end of the rainbow from Harry's. Still, they had many things in common, and music in particular. While Harry was a woodwind specialist, Janet went in for strings, and night after night they worked through all the cello and clarinet duos they could find. And they might have gone on like that forever, she with her loveliness huddled over the fingerboard of her cello and he standing a couple of feet away and playing at and with her as the music moved him.

They were not particularly good musicians, either of them, but their mutual interest kept them close, and they spent their leisure listening or playing, all of which transcended the need to talk. For talk breeds argument, and argument can ruin a marriage—as it almost did theirs.

The trouble started with the Bucconi murder, a knife job that occurred right in front of their own building.

"Harry," Janet said on the first day of the investigation, "you must have seen him—you must have noticed things that nobody else did. You must have some inside information."

"I didn't and I don't."

"But there has to be something. Think about it, Harry."

"What for?"

"Because it's a challenge."

"Why?"

"Because it happened right here—on your own doorstep."

"It happened in the courtyard, and I never met the man."

"Harry, I just don't understand you."

"Agreed," he said. And that evening his clarinet and her cello stayed in their respective cases while Janet and Harry argued. Or at least they argued until 9:00 P.M., when the New York Symphony came on.

The rift between them, however, was not deep, and the following night they played a Pape duet and merely mentioned the Bucconi case in passing. After all, what was a murder compared to a duet for cello and clarinet? And since Harry had only a small part in the homicide investigation, the next evening he was able to take his usual place in the chamber-music group that met every second Wednesday night.

The following week Santangelo was killed. Like Bucconi he had been

stabbed, and, like Bucconi's, his body was found in the courtyard of the Edward Everett Hale Housing Development, where the Boswells lived. That was too much for Janet.

"You knew him," she said to Harry. "You rode up and down in the elevator with him."

"I never did."

"How can you be certain?"

"Because we're on the third floor," he said, "and I walk."

"You walk down, but not up," Janet said knowingly. "We'll all be killed. There's a murderer in this building and you won't even take the trouble to find him."

"I," Harry reminded her, "am not on the homicide squad."

"Does that mean you don't care who gets killed? It might be me."

Harry studied her. Her skin was fair, her eyes were blue, and her hair was the color of raw honey. "They're pretty sure there's a gang war behind this, so you're safe."

"You're telling me gangsters don't kill women?"

"Not without a motive. Why would they harm you?"

"How can anybody be safe when there's a madman with a dagger around?"

The madman theory was reinforced when the third murder victim turned out to be one John Rodman. Until then, the inhabitants of the housing development had leaned to the belief that the murders were the work of an Italian terrorist organization that pursued its enemies around the world and exacted vengeance once a week, with the precision of a metronome. But Rodman wasn't Italian.

Except that he was. The police discovered that John Rodman had been christened Giovanni Romano and had Americanized his name. As a result, the community was again convinced that the Italian terrorist organization was responsible and that ordinary people were helpless against it. Anti-Italian feeling was widespread, and to combat it and to preserve the good name of Italo-Americans, the Christopher Columbus Society posted a \$10,000 reward for anyone solving the triple murders. And, by special dispensation, police officers were eligible.

"You're in a particularly good position to get that reward," Janet told her husband. "You can speak to people in the building. You're a neighbor—they'll tell you things that they wouldn't tell a police officer."

"But I *am* a police officer."

"*They* don't know it."

Harry looked down at his shoes and studied them carefully. "I think they'd guess," he said.

"Try it."

"It wouldn't do much good." Harry pondered the matter. "If I took the elevator," he said, "so did you. And if they'd speak to me as a neighbor, they'd talk to you too."

"But I'm not a policeman," Janet said.

The murders haunted both of them, and their marriage was not as before. Janet was just as comely, Harry was just as slow, and they played the same duets as before, but the pucker had gone out of the vinegar. Life was flat—unaccountably, the world had changed.

The wheels of justice, however, were turning, and certain facts emerged. It had taken months of intensive, painstaking investigation to work them out, but there they were—incontrovertible proof, beautifully analyzed and perfectly dovetailed.

Thanks to the combined efforts of the local police, the state Bureau of Investigation, Interpol, and the police departments of Naples and Palermo, plus an assist from Scotland Yard and the French Sûreté, the story emerged of a vendetta that began with a seduction in a small Sicilian village and ended in the three slayings at the Edward Everett Hale Housing Development.

Blowing his soul into the reed that produced the soft, fluid notes of a Beethoven sonata transcribed for clarinet, Harry thought dreamily of the idyll back in that village, and he seemed to see Maria Turano, dark-eyed and lovely, walking barefoot to the village pump, where she filled the pails she'd brought from the stone cottage where her family lived.

Harry was convinced that every young man in the village came rushing to the pump hoping to earn the privilege of carrying Maria's burden back to her house. But Francesco always won the honor, just as he won the privilege of walking alongside her in the village square on the warm, balmy evenings that quickened the blood and sent wild, heady impulses coursing along the nerve paths to end up in summer madness. Exactly how the pair evaded the eyes of their parents and managed a moonlight tryst, no one knew, but Maria's pregnancy was ample evidence of what had happened.

Surely Francesco must have been ready to cherish and wed—but what was he? A shepherd who wasted his time blowing on a reed when he should have been tending his flocks. Although a born musician, he was unworthy of the hand and soul of Maria. As a result, three of her cousins set upon Francesco and did to him what had been done to Abelard so many centuries before. And having done this, they fled to America.

There was evidence to the effect that someone in Francesco's family had been notified, and it was also on the record that his family was spoken of as a musical one. The heredity of Pan and his way with a reed was spread liberally through the entire tribe, but with that trickle of information—the murderer was a musician and he was of Italian extraction—the trail ended.

Meanwhile the \$10,000 reward hung like an Aeolian harp in the branches of a eucalyptus tree, and Janet, sitting on the couch and holding hands with Harry while they watched the great orchestras of the world perform on TV, spoke often of the case.

"To think he's living right here in this building and the police are doing nothing!" she said one evening while they were listening to the All-American Symphony Orchestra. Her breast heaved with emotion, but eased off as she listened to the opening strains of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. She stared at the conductor, but some gesture of his aroused her indignation and she returned to her theme. "Why," she said, "don't the police go through the whole building apartment by apartment and make people tell them the truth?"

"You can't just walk into a house and start asking questions," Harry said. "You need a warrant."

"If I ever see that man in the elevator," Janet said furiously, "I won't bother with all your rules."

"How will you know him?"

"From his eyes. They'll be like ice, and I'll shiver all the way down my spine."

"I doubt it," Harry said. "Shh! Just listen."

"If you could only—"

But Harry grabbed her hand and sat up excitedly. "Look!" he said. "Look!"

"At what?"

"At him. Don't you notice anything?"

"Nothing in particular. Why? What?"

"His lip," Harry said in an awed voice. "His upper lip!"

"What of it?"

"He's a fraud," Harry said slowly. "All-American Orchestral Nonsense!"

His doubts triggered off the investigation into the background of Owen Frowley, clarinetist. Born in Omaha, Nebraska, he had studied wind instruments at the Long Institute. He'd been a member of WMFH Symphony for three years and had appeared as guest soloist with a great many different groups.

Harry studied the man's rap sheet, made various phone calls, and then went to talk to the Chief. As a result, one week later, Owen Frowley—Francisco—was arrested and charged with the three homicides.

That night Harry came home wearily, but with a check for \$10,000.

"It took a lot of work," he said. "He'd covered everything but the one piece of evidence that finally broke him."

"What was that?"

"The thing I noticed in the first place. He claimed he was an American and had studied at the Long Institute under James Weirton, now deceased. He figured it would be hard to prove he hadn't studied at the Long when his supposed teacher was dead. He thought he was safe."

"But how—"

"At the Long, as well as everywhere in this country, we're taught to blow with the reed pressed on the lower lip—but in Sicily they blow with the reed pressed against the upper lip. So I knew he came from somewhere in Italy, and Sicily was a good guess."

"But suppose he claimed he'd had an Italian teacher before he even went to the Long—then what?"

Harry considered the point carefully. "I never thought of that," he said finally. "But neither did he."



There was plenty of room for suspicion all round . . .

THE RISE AND FALL OF SARAH MERRION by ANNE MORICE



When, at the age of sixty-five, Bertram Merrion took as his second wife Sarah Jarvis, who was more than twenty years his junior, it was assumed by all those closest to him that his motives were more practical than romantic. Everyone concluded that he had acted strictly in accordance with his character and reputation—the motive in this case being the prudent one of acquiring a cut-rate housekeeper who, with moderate luck, would still be strong and active when he was on his death bed and,

THE RISE AND FALL OF SARAH MERRION

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furthermore, would be in no position to hand in her notice however spoiled, selfish, and demanding he might allow himself to become.

Bertie had been spoiled and selfish all his life and, as the years went by, had become increasingly mean, which were some of the reasons why his first wife had relinquished her position as chatelaine of Montaignon House, with all its acres and grandeur, for a life of obscurity with the head groom and in due course—the course being slightly less than due in the case of the first-born—their three sporty and handsome children.

However, Bertie was not solely to blame for these failings, for he had been spoiled throughout childhood and early youth by his silly, rich, and doting mother—and she had been the first of a long succession. He had been a good-looking young man and when her influence waned and he became a subaltern in the Brigade of Guards, he had been spoiled by legions of well born and pretty girls who had hung on his every word, doubtless in the hope that one of them would introduce a proposal of marriage. For most, however, it was a lost cause. They should have realized that such words as those would only be spoken to someone at least as well heeled as himself. In fact, on the day he found the one who fulfilled this requirement and had a titled father thrown in, the other candidates might just as well never have existed—one of several omissions in the catalogue of weaknesses so far ascribed to Bertie being that he was a crashing snob.

It was for the last reason that, while his second marriage after so long an interval excited little comment, his choice of bride did come as some surprise. Sarah was a pleasant, unpretentious sort of woman, the widow of an income-tax inspector who had expired from a heart attack after rashly plunging his garden fork into a tangle of bindweed which had concealed the presence beneath of a wasps' nest. But Sarah was far from being in Bertie's league. To her, Montaignon House had always been the big place that was open to the public on four Sundays of every summer. The suggestion that she might one day preside behind its celebrated Rockingham tea service in its celebrated pink drawing room would have been regarded by herself and her circle of friends as a joke in dubious taste.

All this might have indicated to the less cynical that Bertie's heart as much as his head had prompted the match. But Pamela Stevenson, a second cousin on the distaff side, was not of their number. As she remarked to her husband, then Group Captain Dick Stevenson of the

R. A. F., it was anyone's guess whether Sarah had been the best that Bertie could get, or whether he was counting on service and subservience being more easily obtainable from a woman without means or importance of her own.

Nor was this the only mental conflict to grapple with. Pamela had been of several minds ever since learning of the impending marriage, though all of them solidly based on self-interest. On the one hand, as she also candidly admitted to Dick, there was the matter of the inheritance. Bertie himself was an only child and his first marriage had not been blessed with children, which may have been yet another reason for his wife's defection. He had inherited the property from his father and ample means for its upkeep from his mother, but neither was entailed and there was no heir apparent.

Pamela, being his nearest blood relation, had been confident of a head start in the inheritance stakes and she had not neglected to consolidate her position by word or deed, nor to make herself as far as possible indispensable to the old monster.

There had been rival contenders, of course, and she was far from alone in the field. Distant relatives, former comrades, godsons, and godsons' wives had tumbled over themselves to woo him and had been assiduous in inviting him to their family gatherings at Christmas and Easter. They named their offspring after him and, when circumstances obliged them to, sweetly endured the tedium of his conversation, which centered mainly on his own poor health, the Communist leanings of the current government, and the iniquities of the Inland Revenue.

None, however, had succeeded in outstripping Pamela, who, in addition to dedicated efforts in all these departments, had contrived to conceal her boredom with a show of sympathetic affection, which in fact was natural to her and only became forced and insincere after a few hours in Bertie's company.

This was why, on learning of his second marriage, Pamela's feelings had been so thoroughly mixed. Welcome as the event was in one way, inevitably all the long, hard-fought-for rewards had dwindled overnight to the second-best tea service. It was hardly conceivable that Sarah would be so impractical as to waste a moment in ensuring that every last penny would now pass to her.

"And jolly good luck to her is what I say!" Pamela announced, possibly for the third time. "If he only hangs on for another five years, it's my

opinion that she'll have earned it twice over."

These were brave words—but it was not long before she began to believe in them herself and was faintly surprised to discover how much joy there was in being relieved of the perpetual burden of dancing attendance on Bertie, of the sacrifice of her pleasant, well ordered routine during his visits, and the even greater sacrifice demanded by the return visits to Montaignon House. Above all she was thankful to be free of the constant nagging sensation of having to devote so much more time to him than she wished and so much less than she ought.

However, if feelings about this second marriage had been mixed, it was nothing to the tumult of emotions which succeeded them when, in the early hours of the morning after its fifth anniversary, Sarah fell downstairs, broke her neck, and died instantly.

It was the very first time since the wedding that the Stevensons had set foot in Montaignon, and the other four members of the house party were in the same situation—although this was not due to coolness on either side. On the contrary, albeit at a distance, the most cordial relations had been maintained, largely due to Sarah's thoughtfulness and her cheerful assurances whenever one of them telephoned that she and Bertie were in the pink of health, so much enjoying the current television serial, and looking forward to the spring or summer as the case might be. They had come to depend on her to cushion their peace of mind and release them from their twin obsessions of greed and guilt.

It was therefore in a spirit of the most carefree optimism that the guests had assembled for this long weekend in early December, the celebration of five years of wedded bliss.

As well as Pamela and Dick, now elevated to the rank of Air Marshal, they included Colonel Hugh Metcalfe, a brother-in-law left over from Bertie's first marriage and for many years his only close friend. In those days he had been a constant visitor at Montaignon, possibly finding its discomforts and tediums relatively tolerable after the tiny flat in Wimbledon which was the best that his pension would stretch to.

Also present was Bertie's godson, Paul Sykes, an irascible, prematurely pompous man, who had left the Army at the age of thirty and never really found anywhere else to go. He was accompanied by his wife Lois and their thirteen-year-old son—usually, and appropriately, known as Bunny.

In the pre-Sarah days, Lois had been one of Pamela's keenest rivals

or Bertie's approval. There had been a certain mistrust between them which their joint disappointment had done little to dispel. Bunny had seen a prized weapon in Lois's armory, for he had been sycophantically baptized Bertram, a clever move which had been consolidated over the years by regular reports on his triumphant progress through kindergarten and prep school. Particularly stressed was his amazing prowess as a slow left-arm bowler, since cricket was the only game in which Bertram senior had ever shown any interest.

Pamela's one compensation for the humiliation of failing to produce a baby Bertram of her own was the discovery that even the most besotted parents could have little cause for satisfaction with Bunny in adolescence. He was a pert and chinless boy with a muddy complexion and manners to match. Understandably, he was bored stiff by being confined for days on end in this large, gloomy, and uncomfortable house, where the pattern of life was specifically geared to the needs of middle-aged and elderly people. However, far from attempting to enliven the proceedings, Bunny's invariable response to all suggestions as to how he might divert himself was: "Oh, *must* I?" or the even more contemptuous: "Do you *mind*?"

He was also excessively greedy and, to Pamela's secret disapproval, was allowed—positively encouraged—to overindulge himself in food and wine. In fact, by the end of the Saturday evening festivities which marked the high point of these anniversary celebrations, it was, as she remarked to Dick in the privacy of their bedroom, a toss-up as to whether Bunny or Sarah had been the more plastered.

"Do you suppose she has taken to the bottle?" she asked him. "I mean, I'd have every sympathy with her if she had. It's probably exactly what I'd have done myself, but Sarah has always been such a dependable, down-to-earth character. I thought she was made of sterner stuff."

"Me too, but I'm afraid the way she was reeling about tonight does indicate she's got into a rather bad state."

"Poor old Sarah! You don't think it was just the excitement of this special occasion, and she was letting it rip for once?"

"No, I don't—and I'll tell you why, old girl. She didn't take any more champagne tonight than the rest of us. I happened to notice because Bertie kept a tight hold on the bottles the whole evening and he wasn't all that quick in opening them. Do you remember when he was boasting about the celebrated Montaignon ghost having come back to haunt the

place—how it could be heard clanging about in the library in the small hours, or some such drivel? He got so carried away that he quite overlooked the fact that we'd all been nursing empty glasses for about a quarter of an hour."

"Yes, I do remember, and also that you tried to remedy matters by slinking off to the drinks tray."

"Well, you must agree it was boring, and I was only trying to do my bit to prevent the party from dying on its feet. The old boy got quite shirty about it. Snatched the bottle out of my hand and told me he was perfectly capable of looking after his own guests in his own house, thank you very much. Pompous old fool! Still, I'll forgive him now, because it probably means that he knows all about Sarah's little weakness and is trying to keep things under control as far as possible. All the same, I don't rate his chances very high because, apart from that ghastly kid—who couldn't be expected to have a very strong head at his age—we were all as sober as judges. Well, now, remembering that Sarah and Bertie have separate rooms, what conclusion do you draw?"

"That she keeps a private bottle tucked away in hers and had already had a couple of stiff ones before she came downstairs?"

"Exactly! Not too good, is it?"

"I think it's rather funny in a way," Pamela said. "Sad too, of course—but when one remembers how Bertie demeaned himself by marrying her, sacrificing his pride in order to procure a nurse-house-keeper for his old age! And now, according to you, when the time has come to reap the benefits, he's stuck with a raving alcoholic."

"I don't give a damn about that," Dick told her. "Selfish old bastard! High time he got his deserts, if you ask me. Sarah's the one I feel sorry about. She's a good sort and I hate to see a woman get into that state. Much worse than in a man, in my opinion."

In Dick's opinion almost everything women did was much worse than when done by men, but Pamela was quite resigned to this and she said soothingly: "Well, we must see what we can do to help. I'll try and have a chat with her in the morning and find out how far it's gone."

However, before the morning came, Sarah was beyond all human aid. At some point during the night she had left her room and attempted to go downstairs—presumably, some thought, for a private raid on the drinks cabinet. Whatever her objective, she had failed to reach it.

It was 6:45 A.M. when Hugh Metcalfe found her lying at the foot of the staircase. By that time she had been dead for several hours and, but for Bertie's parsimony, the delay would have been even longer. He had been too mean to install extra bathrooms when he took over Montaignon House and their number remained the same as in the days of his father and grandfather—two to each landing. Hugh, who suffered from a chronic disorder of the bladder, had been compelled to make two sorties during the night and it was on the second of these, when the first pale wintry daylight was filtering into the hall below, that he had glanced down and seen the blurred outline of a human form at the bottom of the massive oak staircase.

There were six adult and responsible witnesses to testify that Sarah had been in an advanced state of intoxication when she went to bed. But two of the men were reluctant to do so, evidently finding something unchivalrous in admitting such a distasteful truth about their hostess, and the third—Bertie himself—flatly and angrily denied it. When Pamela pointed out that, however hard he strove to conceal it, the domestic staff would undoubtedly spread the word throughout the village and neighboring houses, he merely replied that they were a lazy lot of beggars anyway, eating their heads off and filching his whisky, and if they had the confounded impudence to utter a word on the subject he would not hesitate to sack them on the spot.

Pamela managed to take the others aside while they waited for the doctor to arrive. During a muttered conference, she urged upon them the necessity of presenting a united front, trusting to luck that everyone would realize that Bertie was too shocked to know what he was saying.

"Otherwise you do see, don't you," she murmured, "there's going to be one hell of an upset. Sarah was as strong as an ox, and there's never been a hint of cardiac trouble—no giddy spells or anything convenient like that to account for her falling. In the circumstances, I doubt very much if Dr. Gilliatt could sign the death certificate without some further investigation—and you can see where that would land us! Post-mortem, inquest, every imaginable horror! And, whatever the outcome, it would be months before the gossip died down. Much as it goes against the grain—and I know I speak for all of us here—it will save far more unpleasantness in the end if we make it perfectly clear that Sarah was not in control of herself."

This was enough to persuade all but one of her audience—although Lois, resenting the fact that Pamela should take it upon herself in her usual bossy fashion to set the tone, was the last to fall in line openly. A far more obstinate recalcitrant was Hugh Metcalfe, and it was not until Pamela had hit upon the bright idea that Bertie's feelings should be their first concern that he eventually capitulated. Two minutes before Dr. Gilliatt's car pulled up outside the front door Hugh had allowed himself to be persuaded that anything at all would be preferable to the pain and embarrassment his poor old kinsman and fellow officer would have to endure in the event of a public inquest into his wife's death.

Dick Stevenson was deeply troubled, but he had not occupied a desk at the Air Ministry for three years without learning that a worry shared was a responsibility halved. At the earliest possible moment he sought out his wife and made her a party to his concern.

He was unable to do this until quite late in the day. Pamela and Lois, temporarily burying the hatchet in this crisis, had spent most of the afternoon closeted in the library composing announcements for the obituary columns, conferring with Mr. Baines, the undertaker, and Mr. Salisbury-Jones, the Vicar, dispatching telegrams, and drawing up lists of those who warranted personal invitations to the funeral.

They had received no help from Bertie in these tasks, since he had already become bored by the whole business and, declaring himself to be prostrated by grief, had stumped off to his bedroom with the portable television set. Even the knowledge that he would later emerge to issue a stream of complaints about the extravagance and bad taste of everything they had done did not dampen their good humor, for this was an activity they both enjoyed and excelled in. More heartwarming still was the recollection of Dr. Gilliatt listening respectfully to the sad tale of Sarah's fall from grace and the upper landing, and then signing the death certificate without a murmur. "Accidents in the home," he commented gravely, accepting a thimbleful of South African sherry, "account for a higher death rate than any other single factor."

All this contentment was given a nasty dent by Dick's disclosure when at last he found a chance to speak to Pamela in private.

"Listen, old girl," he began, "when you got us all toeing the line this morning about making it clear to the doctor that poor old Sarah had been

a bit, well, under the weather, was there anything behind it you didn't tell us?"

"No, I don't think so. How do you mean, Dick?"

"I'm not criticizing, mind you! I'm all for avoiding unpleasantness and I agree that you probably hit on the right way to go about it—but I was just wondering whether there was another reason as well which you didn't see fit to mention."

"Such as?"

"Well, you know," he said, reluctantly dragging it out at last, "whether you believed there was any possibility that it might not have been an accident at all?"

"Oh, no, my dear, not for one moment. Although, to be honest, it did occur to me that Dr. Gilliatt might be obliged to take it into account, simply to cover himself, unless we managed to head him off."

Dick did not look particularly reassured by this explanation. "Trouble is, I've a nasty feeling he'd have been right," he said gloomily.

"Oh, come now!" she admonished him. "No need to look on the dark side."

"I found this," he said, laying a piece of black thread about an inch and a half long on the open palm of his hand. "It's the kind tailors use sometimes—a lot stronger and more wiry than that flimsy stuff you sew my buttons on with."

"I see! And where did you find it? Or don't I need to ask?"

"On the outer edge of the second stair from the top. It looked like a crack in the wood till I touched it. I was standing there, you see—peering about and trying to work out how such a ghastly thing could have happened—when it caught my eye."

"You did quite right to pick it up and say nothing," Pamela told him soothingly.

"The question is—ought I to go on saying nothing? Have I—has *anyone*—the right to keep silent over a thing like this?"

"Oh, every right—a positive duty, in fact. I don't know how many tailors have sat up there plying their needles since the staircase was last swept, but there can't have been many. You must try to put it out of your mind. It is just the kind of thing that's calculated to raise the rumpus we're all so anxious to avoid."

"You really believe, don't you, Pam, that somebody tied a length of strong thread across the stairs with the deliberate intention of causing

her to fall and break her neck? Damn it all, you're not surprised?"

"Oh, nonsense! I'm sure we are all quite incapable of such a thing. Besides, how could any of us have known Sarah would try to go downstairs in the middle of the night? The fact remains, unfortunately, that there are six of us who stand to gain quite a lot by her death."

"Six, did you say?"

"Yes—why not? I daresay Bunny must sometimes have heard his parents lamenting the end of his chances of growing up to be Squire of Montaignon—and that kind of prank is something one particularly associates with nasty little boys of his age."

"Oh, I'm with you all the way there, but you surely can't include poor old Hugh?"

"I don't include or exclude anyone. How many times must I repeat that it isn't my opinion that counts? Fortunately there will be no inquest, and the best thing we can do is to put all these disagreeable thoughts out of our heads and never refer to them again."

However, they had not heard the last of it yet—as she was soon to discover.

The party stayed on until after the funeral and on the following day Bertie accompanied the Stevensons on the journey south to their home in Berkshire, there to remain until after Christmas, which was still two weeks off. Paul and Lois were to collect him and take their turn early in the New Year.

Hunching up her legs in the confined space of the back seat, after Bertie had at length been arranged to his own satisfaction with rugs and hot-water bottles in front, Pamela had the sensation of stepping back onto a familiar treadmill. Familiar but more intolerable than before since, having emptied her mind of all thoughts of the crock of gold that waited for her at the end of it, the bleak truth had been borne in upon her during the past twenty-four hours that the five years of carefree and Bertie-free independence had been cheap at the price. The crock of gold had turned into a mess of pottage and the knife had been given a further twist in the wound by the fact that she now felt responsible and at times a little sorry for him. She knew that however outrageously he behaved she could never bring herself to shut him out of their lives.

In the days that followed, his outrageousness exceeded her worst fears. After a week of struggling over Christmas cards, Christmas presents,

Christmas holly, pudding, turkey, and tree—in the intervals between ensuring that his egg was not over-boiled, finding out where that draught came from, and generally waiting on him hand and foot—she was almost at breaking point. That point arrived when, at forty-eight hours' notice, Pam's and Dick's dearest friends, who always came down from Wales to spend Christmas with them, begged off on learning that the party would also include Bertie. Pamela retired to her room and, after locking the door, lay down on her bed and went quietly into hysterics.

And that was the evening of the great disclosure.

Pamela was pale and withdrawn during dinner, speaking only when obliged to, whereas Bertie, realizing perhaps that he had gone too far for his own good, set out to make himself agreeable, admiring her dress and praising the food. This cut no ice at all and her responses remained as stony as ever.

Dick was also alarmed by his wife's appearance and demeanor. He had been shocked and aggrieved to arrive home after a hard day's toil at the Air Ministry to find her locked and incommunicado in her bedroom and refusing to come out until it was time to dish up the chicken casserole. It was so unlike her and when he had attempted to jolly things along by recounting one or two amusing incidents that had occurred during the day and had been rewarded by no more than a wintry smile, he threw in his hand and went into a private sulk on his own account.

This really unnerved Bertie, and he turned the charm on in an even stronger gush, to the point where they heard him assuring them that one of the happiest moments of his life had occurred when he walked back into this warm and friendly ambiance, and had—dare he say it?—found himself so very welcome. This bizarre declaration made the whole occasion so macabre that Dick lost his nerve and, in a final desperate attempt to enliven the atmosphere, brought out one of his two remaining bottles of the special Chateau Yquem to accompany the rhubarb tart.

Perhaps recognizing the sacrificial nature of this gesture, Pamela allowed herself to melt a little. Unfortunately, Bertie melted too far and too fast and, after his second glass, self-pity verged on the lachrymose. His complaints this time, however—to the Stevensons' shock and embarrassment—were all directed against Sarah.

"You'll never know what I had to put up with from that woman all those years," he whimpered. "A living hell it's been."

"Now, Bertie, you know very well that's not true," Pamela told him in the tone of one rebuking a spoiled child. "Sarah looked after you like an angel."

"No, she didn't—you know nothing about it. Not that I blame you for that, mind you, although I do think you might have troubled yourselves about me a bit more than you did. But the truth is that she fooled you just as she'd fooled me. Wicked, grasping, scheming shrew—that's what she was."

"Well, now," Dick said briskly, "why don't we all take our glasses back to the fire? It's getting on for nine and we don't want to miss the news, do we?"

Pamela was the traitor who blocked this well-meaning maneuver. Her strange, implacable mood had not quite gone away. Gently raising her hand and speaking with an icy calm, she said: "Just a minute, please, Dick. Before we all go sit round the television, I should be interested to hear what reason Bertie has for making these extraordinary accusations."

"Just a drop more of that excellent wine, then," Bertie replied, not the least abashed, "and I'll be glad to tell you. Can't think why I've kept silent about it for so long, as a matter of fact. Must be my stupid, old-fashioned code of loyalty, I suppose—but it's high time you both heard the truth."

"You call them extraordinary accusations, Pamela, because you're a good woman who can't see further than your own nose. It never occurred to you the few times you did bother to ring up and Sarah told you everything in the garden was lovely that she was pulling the wool over your eyes?"

"No. Why should it have?"

"Because she was. It wasn't lovely at all. I've never been more lonely and miserable and put upon in my life. I missed all those pleasant times I used to spend here. There wasn't a bloody soul to talk to. Sarah saw to that. She was no fairy sprite, but she was a lot quicker on her feet than me, and every time the telephone rang she was onto it like a ferret. Then I'd have to listen to her yapping on about how well and happy I was."

"But you could have written to us, Bertie, and invited us to stay. You know you only had to say so, if you needed us."

"She wouldn't have it. She'd have torn up a letter of that kind before she was halfway to the post. She wanted to cut me off from all my family

and friends, from everything that had made life tolerable, and to keep me a prisoner. I wasn't even allowed to have poor old Hugh to stay. I ask you! After nearly fifty years! My oldest friend!"

"But what reason did she give?"

"Oh, a lot of balderdash! That it was all too much for her, that we didn't have nearly enough staff to run the place, and that she was worn out as it was without having guests to wait on and cook for as well as me. All that claptrap!"

"In that case, why didn't you both come and stay with us sometimes? We'd have been delighted to see you and so would Lois and Paul, I daresay, and that would have given Sarah a real rest from all the chores. Didn't that occur to you?"

"Of course, it did. Occurred to me pretty well every day. Oh, my dear Pamela, you'll never know how much I've missed you all and the feeling that you'd put me up here anytime I liked to come. I shan't forget it, you know. You and Dick may depend on that. Everything is back to where it was in the old days before I was chained to that devilish woman, knowing that these doors would be closed to me for the rest of my life."

In so saying he made a sweeping gesture, as though literally pointing to the doors, and knocked over his glass, which luckily now only contained a few drops of wine.

"So why did you never come?" Dick asked, mopping up the damage to the tablecloth and then, at a signal from his wife, replenishing the glass.

"Why? Want me to tell you why? You ought to have understood enough by now not to need any explanation, but I'll tell you. Sarah wouldn't have it. Scared stiff you'd see through her little game and rally round to put a stop to it, that's why. That was the one contingency she couldn't risk."

"But, Bertie, my dear," Pamela said, still in the same flat unemotional voice which Dick found so devastating, "I still don't understand how Sarah could have played it both ways. How could she pretend that it would be too much work for her to have guests at Montaignon House—and too difficult to spend a few days here with Dick and me? She wouldn't have been expected to lift a finger if you came here. And we'd have been very glad to invite Hugh as well—you must have known that."

"Course I did. And so did she. Last thing she wanted. Got me in her power, wanted to keep it like that. Bloody female Gestapo! Know what she said?"

"No. What did she say?"

"That she couldn't go away to stay because of this insomnia of hers. Couldn't get through the night without going down to the kitchen to make herself a hot drink or a snack every so often, and she said you couldn't go traipsing all over the place in the middle of the night in other people's houses."

In the brief silence that followed, Dick risked a glance at Pamela, and his heart sank into the depths of his stomach.

"I see!" she said softly. "So that's how it was done! That's how you knew she would be going downstairs that night after we were all in bed. And if not that night, then the one after—and all of us there to bear witness that she was drunk. Incidentally, Bertie, how did she get so drunk? Was that your doing too?"

"Easy as falling off a log, old girl. Just popped a couple of valium into her champagne. Didn't hurt her—wouldn't hurt a fly. Just made her a bit woozy, that's all."

This time the silence was so protracted that he grew frightened and started to blubber. "Don't blame me, do you? I'm an old man . . . nothing much to look forward to . . . and you'd all gone away and left me in the lurch . . . I was so . . ."

"What?"

"So *bored*. Surely you can understand that, can't you?"

Pamela pushed back her chair and stood up.

"I think I can understand, up to a point," she said, "but perhaps not quite enough. After all, it was Sarah who invited us all to Montaignon for your anniversary. I need to think about it a little and then perhaps we should have another talk in the morning. And now, if you're both quite ready, let's go and see what horrors they've got for us on the news."



LETTERS

Thanks to all of you who have taken the time to write and let us know what you like about *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*—as well as what you don't like. We're always eager to listen to you, our readers, since we want to give you what you want to read in *AHMM*—so please keep the letters coming. We may not publish this column every month but, when we do, we will include letters, or excerpts of letters, with comments on what we publish, queries we can answer, and so forth.

One letter we've received that might be of special interest to readers who collect complete sets of *AHMM* is from F. Neron, who is missing the back issues of March and April 1970 and April 1971. Any reader who has extra copies of these issues and would like to offer them to Mr. Neron for exchange should write directly to him, R.R. 3, Box 10, Magog, P.Q., Canada J1X 3W4. And if other collectors are interested in having their *AHMM* needs and/or offers listed in this column, please write to me with the information.

Susan Calderella
Letters Editor

I enjoy your magazine very much, and read it each month. . . . The point of this letter is that mistakes in the illustrations hardly ever happen in your magazine, but [there was one] in the August 1979 issue. On page 41 is a story called "Getting the Goods" by Bruce M. Fisher. The drawing

LETTERS

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... shows a girl stealing a camera. She is putting it in her handbag with her right hand, while holding the bag [with] her left shoulder and hand. But the story says that her right hand did the misdirecting and her left hand did the work. "It seized the desired article, curled back, and dropped it into the handbag she opened with her little finger." The picture shows just the opposite—and the guard would easily catch her in the act. . . But to err is human, to forgive divine.

Paul Frayne
New York, New York

Thank you. I am sorry to inform you that Mr. Fisher, a Canadian, died on June 8th of this year. He was a favorite contributor to AHMM and we will miss him. —S.C.

I have always enjoyed mystery stories. Generally, the stories were full length in book form. The intricate plots, the hints at clues, and the challenges have been of interest to me. . . Several years ago I became acquainted with *AHMM*. I have been particularly delighted to find these same characteristics in shorter versions. Short mystery stories are quickly read, but still require time to analyze or actually figure out the plot. This is a real challenge to me. I appreciate the skill of the writers.

Louise Smiley
Beloit, Wisconsin

I felt compelled to drop you a line and commend you. . . for the excellent issue of *AHMM* (September 1979). Not only were the stories first-rate, but they were arranged in a sensitive order. "The Letter Carrier" (what is more frustrating than not being able to interfere?), which tore at one's heart, was followed by a frothy story ("Easy Change") to take the edge off. . . With each issue, *AHMM* gets better and better. Thanking you for (indeed) "good reading,"

Carol Ann Schachter
New York, New York

I'd like to know who does the funny cartoons for the cover. . . I have

been buying your magazine for many years and I read the whole thing every month. Keep up the good work.

Myra Morani
New York, New York

The cover art is by Mark Gotbaum. The story illustrations are drawn by Ron McCarty —S.C.

It's great to see you're starting a Letters to the Editor column. I buy the book every month and read it though. The stories are usually fine but lately some have been a bit too predictable. One in the July 1979 issue, entitled "Estate Sale" . . . I knew from looking at the picture that they were vampires! It took all the fun out of it. . . [But] I'll keep reading and hope for the best.

Jack Sareil
New York, New York

I loved your September issue. The minute I got my hands on it I devoured the whole thing. . . "Hangfire" by L. F. James was great. I've been a mystery fan for a long time, but that was the first story I've ever read which had so many details about guns. The surprise ending was a shock, but it made a lot of sense. I also loved "The Letter Carrier" by Kathryn Gottlieb. I'm not ashamed to say I had a lump in my throat at the end of it. I liked both stories because they had character to them. They weren't just about crimes. . . I would love to try my hand at writing a story. Does a person have to have an agent or can anybody try?

Aurora Dell
New York, New York

We are happy to read stories directly from authors as well as through agents. Anyone interested in submitting a story to AHMM is welcome to write to the magazine for a set of writer's guidelines. Our address is: Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.—S.C.

The muggers took the package . . .

DON'T CALL IT BLACKMAIL

by
**CARROLL
MAYERS**



I was plenty upset that day. I had a date to take Violet to dinner and a show, but in the middle of the morning Mr. Perry said he wanted me to stay overtime to take a complete inventory of the stockroom.

"Gee, Mr. Perry," I began, "I had plans for tonight—"

Mr. Perry was my immediate boss at Jefferson Jewelers. "I'm sorry, Flynn," he said, "but the Purchasing Department wants an itemized count by tomorrow morning. I assume your job comes first."

It sure did. Without a job I couldn't even think of marrying Violet. Violet was no Miss America: she was near-sighted and had to wear thick glasses, and her mouth was too big. But she had a cute tilt-tip nose, a smooth complexion, and dark auburn hair. I got short of breath just thinking about her.

"Yes, sir," I said to Mr. Perry.

The inventory would take me at least three hours, until after eight-thirty, so the evening was shot. I phoned Violet at the flower shop where she worked and explained what had come up.

She wouldn't let me apologize. "Don't be upset, Michael," she said. "We can make it another night." Then she added, "If you're not too late, stop by. I'll fix us a snack."

See what I mean? Gracious and considerate. Honest, you'd've been crazy about Violet too.

The day went slowly—partly, I guess, because I was still brooding over Mr. Perry. Frankly, I didn't like Mr. Perry very much. For one thing, he was a sleek character, well aware of his dark good looks, and I thought that for a married man he was too smooth with the female customers, had too ready an eye for a well-turned ankle. Also, twice in the past six months he'd barely listened when I'd asked for a raise.

"That's out of the question. We're on a very tight budget at present."

"I'd like to get married."

"That's your problem, not ours."

"But—"

"That's all, Flynn. I don't care to discuss it further."

I'd considered quitting, but Violet had talked me out of it, explaining that a new job might be too much of a gamble. So I'd stayed on as stockroom clerk.

At five-thirty I ducked out for a hamburger, got back promptly, and started my inventory. An hour later the phone rang.

It was Mr. Perry. "How are you doing?" he wanted to know.

"Pretty good," I admitted. "I should be finished before eight-thirty."

"Fine," he said. Then: "There's a small package on my desk—I forgot it when I left this evening. I want you to bring it out here when you're through. Take a cab and I'll reimburse you."

The Perry apartment was a posh suite in the West Park Arms complex, well across town; a taxi trek there would eat up another half hour. I'd be even later getting to Violet's.

"Gee, Mr. Perry," I said, "I wanted some free time tonight—"
He was blunt. "That package is a gift I want to give Mrs. Perry tonight."
"But, sir—"

"Don't argue with me. Bring it!" He hung up.

Damn. Just because he'd forgotten that package shouldn't have meant more of my evening was lost. But what could I do?

At twenty past eight I finished the inventory. I went to Mr. Perry's office and found the package. It was neatly done up in Jefferson Jewelers' best gift wrapping. I stuffed it in my pocket and left the store.

No taxis were in sight but there was a hack stand next to a hotel three blocks away. I started walking.

One block from the hotel, I was mugged. Two thugs dragged me into an alley. I was scared but I did try to yell and fight back, but before I could one of them locked a forearm around my throat. The other one pumped a hard fist into my stomach.

I gagged, my knees buckling. The hood who'd slugged me hit me again, this time in the temple. I fell down and my head thudded against the alley paving. I didn't lose consciousness, but a wave of nausea swept over me. I was rolled over and my pockets were emptied; I couldn't do anything about it.

Then the muggers raced off.

I managed to drag myself to my feet, gulping air. My jacket was wrenched from my shoulders, my rear trouser pockets torn away. The thugs had gotten my wallet with twenty-two dollars—

Abruptly, additional comprehension registered. I patted my jacket pocket frantically, my scalp prickling. The muggers had also taken Mr. Perry's package.

I leaned against the alley wall and closed my eyes. I was really sick then.

After a minute, I began to pull myself together. I couldn't help what had happened. With my wallet gone, I had no money for cab fare. I could have asked the driver to wait and gotten the money from Mr. Perry as he'd promised, but there was no point in riding all the way out there just to tell him I'd lost the package.

On the other hand, I had to let him know. I found some odd change on the pavement the hoods hadn't bothered with, so I dusted myself off as best I could and hunted up a public phone in a drugstore.

Mr. Perry's voice crackled. "You *what?*"

I repeated that I'd been mugged and that the thugs had taken his package. "I couldn't help it," I said.

"You might've yelled—gotten help."

"They jumped me too fast—"

"For your information, there was a four-hundred-dollar diamond-chip bracelet in that package!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Perry."

"—for which I have every intention of holding you personally responsible!"

That did it. I'd been punched and pummeled, my suit ruined—I might have been killed—but Mr. Perry didn't care. He hadn't even asked if I'd been hurt. All he cared about was that bracelet.

So I shouted back at him. I said, "You can't blame me! I told you, I didn't have a chance!"

There was a long pause; I could hear Mr. Perry draw a deep breath. When he finally spoke, his tone was icy. "We'll discuss this tomorrow, Flynn." Then he broke the connection.

My head hurt and my stomach hurt. I could have gone home to bed, but I decided to see Violet and tell her what had happened. There was enough change left for the bus.

She was shocked at my disheveled appearance. "Michaël! What in the world—?"

"I got mugged after I left the store."

"Oh, no! Are you hurt?"

I assured her I was only shaken up, but I didn't protest when she made me stretch out on the sofa. She got a basin and a washcloth and bathed my face.

"How did it happen?" Violet's hazel eyes continued to mirror deep concern behind their thick lenses.

I told her, explaining how Mr. Perry had ordered me to bring the bracelet out to his apartment and how the muggers had taken the package along with my wallet.

"Mr. Perry wanted that bracelet tonight?" she said.

"He insisted on it," I said. "It's probably Mrs. Perry's birthday or their anniversary."

She bathed my brow again. "Do you think he'll fire you?"

"Or make me pay for the bracelet. Maybe both."

DON'T CALL IT BLACKMAIL

Violet smiled. "Maybe he won't do either, Michael."

"Eh?"

She put the basin aside. "You've mentioned Mr. Perry's roving eye more than once," she said. "What do you know about his wife?"

"Not very much," I said. "Only that she's an active clubwoman—she flits around a lot, giving speeches."

"Exactly," Violet said. "And it just so happens that all this week she's chairing a women's political forum upstate. I read about it in the paper."

I blinked. "You think—?"

She cut me short. "There's more," she said, suddenly very animated. "This afternoon Mr. Perry phoned the flower shop and ordered a dozen roses to be delivered to his apartment by eight o'clock tonight. I didn't take the call, but I saw the confirming order when I was checking sales slips before closing." Her eyes danced. "I didn't think anything of it at the time, but now—"

I was following her exactly. Considering his wife's predilection for out-of-town activities plus his own penchant for the ladies, suppose Mr. Perry had acquired an extra-marital *divertissement*? Further, suppose tonight, with Mrs. Perry absent, he had elected to stage an intimate seduction at their apartment with a lady of his choice—said lady to be favored with an expensive piece of jewelry and flowers.

I grinned at Violet. "Bingo!" I said.

And then I remembered that sometimes Violet got carried away. I pressed, "Are you sure, hon? I mean, it *was* Mr. Perry who phoned in that order?"

She nodded. "I saw the slip—Mr. Robert Perry. The West Park Arms."

So there it was. Opportunity knocking like crazy—and there was only one way to answer the door. I got to my feet.

Violet was on the same wavelength. "You're going out there now?"

I grinned again and kissed her. My headache was gone. "Just let me borrow the cab fare and I'm on my way."

I was truly high, but twenty minutes later, standing in the hall outside Mr. Perry's apartment, I had a moment of misgiving. Had Violet and I read the script correctly? My chest got tight. There was only one way to validate our hunch.

I set myself and thumbed the buzzer. When Mr. Perry opened the door I shouldered past before he could block me and zipped through the

foyer into the dimly lighted living room. He recognized me, but he couldn't stop me. All he could do was let out an enraged, "See here—!"

I hardly heard him because what I saw in the shadowy living room—candlelight, no less—instantly shot me to Cloud Nine. There was a small table exquisitely set for two with snowy linen, gleaming crystal and silverware; a frosty ice bucket. I didn't spot any flowers, but that was probably due to the fact that after my initial impression I had eyes only for the luscious, leggy blonde who was perched on the divan regarding me with speechless amazement.

Mr. Perry came storming after me, his face so crimson I was afraid he was going to have a heart attack.

"Flynn! What is the meaning of this?"

I deliberately played it low-key. "I just wanted to confirm that discussion tomorrow, sir," I said. Then, while he continued to sputter and the blonde continued to stare, I turned around and walked out.

At home, I phoned Violet and gave her the good news. She squealed with delight. I felt like squealing myself.

When Mr. Perry came into the store the next morning, he didn't look at me, he looked through me. Finally, at ten o'clock, he called me into his office. His dark features were set, his voice tight.

"Flynn," he said, "I—ah—I've been reconsidering your unfortunate accident last night. Perhaps the police can check pawnshops or known receivers of stolen goods and eventually recover that bracelet. In any event, I was too hasty in blaming you. I retract anything I might have said."

I gave him my best smile. "I appreciate that," I said. "Could we also talk about my raise again?"

A tic began in his cheek. "Oh, yes—well, that's another thing. I believe our revenue has improved to the extent I can recommend an increase. Say—twenty-five a week?"

"Fifty."

The tic really jumped and his concurrence, when it came, was strained. But it did come. "Very well, Fifty."

Violet and I celebrated that night, wine and everything. I guess I drank too much because at one point I began exulting over how smart we'd been, tabbing Mr. Perry's ploy.

Violet stopped me. "I—I think I should tell you something, Michael."
"Eh?"

"That confirming sales slip—I didn't discover until this morning that I'd misread it. Mr. Perry didn't order those roses. They were ordered by another man."

"Another man?"

"Yes," Violet said. "A Mr. Berry, with an apartment in the same complex. I—I guess I read that carbon copy too fast."

No wonder I hadn't spotted any flowers when I'd stormed in. We hadn't been smart at all, just lucky—with the whole affair a fantastic fluke. That Mr. Berry, whoever he was, ordering roses for whatever reason, had been the crazy catalyst for everything.

Violet and I were married last week. I'm still in the stockroom. Naturally, Mr. Perry's attitude isn't too cordial, but I don't mind. Violet and I aren't greedy, but it's nice to have a constant financial reserve—please don't call it blackmail—any time we need it.

As for Violet, I still think she's the most wonderful girl in the world—even if she doesn't see too well.



The cry came every twenty minutes . . .

SWEETHEART, I'M DRY!



by
**ERNEST
SAVAGE**

It was a good rain and Myra Mills welcomed it, although she knew that most of her fellow citizens in this sun-worshipping Southern California town didn't. Southern Californians fret when their patios are denied them, even for a day—and their beaches and golf courses and various other playgrounds. Spoiled rotten, Myra thought. We all are.

Myra welcomed the rain because the windows of her house could be logically closed against it. Then, even if Harry Jenks was out on his

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patio—as he often was no matter what the weather, inured against inclemency by what must surely by now be a ninety-proof body—at least with her windows closed she did not have to hear him, did not have to hear that quarter-deck voice of his bray every twenty minutes or so, “Sweetheart, I’m dry!”; did not have to hear the pewter tankard that seemed organically attached to his hand slam down on the drumlike surface of his patio table as punctuation to the cry.

Just thinking about it—the metronomically regular roar for service, the almost explosive smash of tankard against table—made her turn her back on her rain-streaked kitchen window through which the main visual feature was the Jenkses’ patio, where the loathsome man absorbed booze from dawn to dark (it seemed) while grazing hot-eyed through what seemed acres of girlie magazines, the centerfold occasionally displayed for his poor enslaved wife’s edification (or mortification), and Myra’s too—he wasn’t particular. Myra sighed, but briefly, a taut, swift fighter’s sigh.

With thunder crackling overhead she toured her snug, tidy house like the captain of a ship. It was her pride, this house, the fruit of long labor; and her simple needs now in retirement—to cultivate her garden and, to a point, her mind—enterprises surely as God-warranted as any mankind had yet devised—were being denied her by a bibulous, obscene, stentorian blob of fatty tissue named Harry Jenks, her neighbor now for the longest year of the sixty-three she had lived. She gave another quick fighter’s sigh.

Control was the word. The ability to control her environment, to fashion it to suit her needs. If something on television offended her—the voice of Howard Cosell, for instance—she could shut it off. Motorcycles—for two years she’d fought them, had organized groups of righteously outraged neighbors to swarm to City Council meetings demanding with one voice (hers) that existing (mind you) muffler regulations be rigidly enforced. And she had won. The cycles now purring past her house were an offense only to the eye. And dogs, roaming free or barking all through the long jasmine-scented summer nights, palpable disturbers of the peace (“Would you permit your child to make that much noise, sir?”), had been stopped by citations and fines at her vigilant insistence. A gadfly, the local editorialists called her; an epithet she wore like a flower in her hair. It was all in defense of civilization, decency, and courtesy.

But Harry Jenks?

He had denied her her yard, finally. After last spring and summer and fall, she'd finally given up, her nerves subtly conditioned to the timing of that klaxon demand for service, her very viscera sensing the approach of his call, "Sweetheart, I'm dry!", her hands twitching, the snippers falling from their nerveless hold, or pruning the fruit instead of the twig.

She couldn't stand it any longer. But to whom could she appeal? The police? The Council, her old allies? She knew better.

Thunder crackled again in the sky overhead—unusual in this climate—but Myra scarcely heard. She was back at the kitchen window, her baleful eyes fixed on the oversize custom-built chair from which His Corpulence ruled the world, and thinking, If I sawed partway through the two rear legs some dark night, the next morning when all that tonnage hit the seat . . . But no. Not that she wasn't capable of mayhem and even murder in the defense of right, but it would be too little happening to too much.

Her hands had been gripping the edge of the sink and she released their tension consciously, thinking that at this very moment he was probably shouting for his drink in the house, her conditioned reflexes knowing the time had come even though she couldn't hear his voice. Disgusted with that thought but a little frightened all the same, she peered through the thickening rain at the Jenkses' kitchen window and as God was her judge she saw Mrs. Jenks's head jerk upward as though in response to the call, her dark caged eyes fixing on Myra's in a moment of awful communication before turning to her duty. "Good Lord!" Myra breathed aloud. "This is too much, this must end!" And then: "That poor woman."

She'd spoken to Mrs. Jenks no more than a dozen times in the year they'd been neighbors—brief exchanges of banalities before Mrs. Jenks would turn shyly away. Mrs. Jenks came out of the house only to fetch her husband his drinks and accompanying snacks, and twice a week to go shopping, an automaton in the service of an alcoholic glutton, but with alive suffering eyes, as Myra had just seen.

Jenks was retired-Navy, Myra had learned, but sometimes she wondered sardonically which Navy. The Chinese, maybe, judging by the number of friends who dropped by in this Navy-dominated town. He must have turned off one contingent of colleagues after another and was now alone but not ill-content with his lot—nothing in all that blubber dreaming of escape, it would seem, unless to some Turkish harem aswarm with oiled female flesh. Myra swallowed her disgust and turned away to

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stare out another rain-streaked window at her orphaned yard. Tomorrow, Thursday, was one of Mrs. Jenks's invariable shopping days and Myra resolved with a vigorous squaring of the shoulders to defer taking action no longer. She would meet Mrs. Jenks at the store.

But Thursday came and went without Mrs. Jenks leaving the house. Myra, from her windows facing the Jenkses' place, kept a nervous watch all day. She had it in mind—sobered by a good night's rest—to suggest to Mrs. Jenks, perhaps over lunch after shopping, that Alcoholics Anonymous might help her husband's obvious drinking problem. Or some other form of cure—surely the Navy had some sort of drying-out treatment for its retired (and no doubt numerous) drinkers. It would be a course of action, a step to take, and Myra—a woman of formidable energy—hungered for it, a decision (of sorts) having been made. She was not—she admitted to herself—above a more physical approach to the problem, storming over there one day in a properly elevated dudgeon, ripping the tankard from his hand and raging through his house like a modern Carrie Nation, smashing everything alcoholic in the place. That approach appealed to her long-accumulated sense of outrage—but it would have to be done daily or what was the point? She wanted no temporary solution. The state of her garden required weeks of steady repair.

Friday noon and still Mrs. Jenks hadn't left the house, and Myra, out of bread and milk, programmed a short trip to her own store. A half hour, she thought, whirling out of her drive and up the street as fast as her ancient car would go.

She was in the bread section when Mrs. Jenks literally bumped into her, their carts colliding head-on. "Oh!" Mrs. Jenks said with mock surprise—then dropped her eyes shyly.

Myra flushed deeply, beaten, she realized in a flash, at her own game. "You followed—" she said.

"Yes. I wanted—"

"—to talk to me."

"Yes. Wednesday—when it rained—through the kitchen window—"

"Yes," Myra said sympathetically. "I saw your eyes."

"I was off guard," Mrs. Jenks said, the wounded eyes still shy. "I've wanted to talk with you for a long time. I realize—what he's done. I apologize. For him—for me."

"AA," Myra said briskly. "Send him to AA."

"He won't go. I've tried a dozen times.. He says he's not a drunk. He's happy as a clam."

"And you?"

"I could *kill* him!" She spoke with a savagery that startled Myra.

"Perhaps he'll do it himself," Myra said. She put two loaves of bread in her cart. "Surely he can't drink like that forever. I mean—"

"That any day he'll drop dead?"

"Yes."

"No. He'll live forever—longer than I, surely. He's got the liver of a Boy Scout and the heart of a horse. The doctors don't understand him. No one does."

Divorce him, Myra thought, but held her tongue. Divorce might solve Mrs. Jenks's problem but not necessarily her own. But in an uncontrollable surge of compassion she said it out loud. "Divorce him!"

"Oh!" The two women moved down the aisle, their carts side by side. "Oh, how I wish I could! But—"

"You're Catholic?"

"No. Religion has nothing to do with it. Unless—"

"What?"

"Unless my unholy fear of him could be called religious." A smile, sad and wan, briefly lit Mrs. Jenks's eyes before they dropped again.

"What!" Myra stopped her cart in mid-aisle. "He beats you?" She was outraged. "Mrs. Jenks—*does he beat you?*"

"I'd rather," Mrs. Jenks said, "not talk about it." She moved her cart forward and Myra trailed her like an escort dreadnought. If there was anything she despised in this world it was a man who beat his wife—a bully!

They were at the meat section and Mrs. Jenks paused long enough to select three large steaks—nearly ten dollars' worth. On the bottom shelf of her cart she had already accumulated a half-dozen boxes of snack crackers and a half-dozen bags of potato chips—Jenks's basic diet between slabs of meat. Bully, glutton, boozier—surely some righteous force, some irrepressible indignation of Nature would strike down such a man! Myra bristled, pity for the slump-shouldered figure of the petite woman surging through her again.

"What," she asked acidly, "do *you* eat?"

"I don't need much," Mrs. Jenks said. "Milk—I have an ulcer."

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"Small wonder," Myra muttered. "You poor thing," she added softly. "You poor, poor thing."

They passed through the milk section and each took two half gallons without comment. Ahead was the liquor department and Myra, after a second thought, took a quart of vodka from the shelf. She had nothing against drinking, she wanted Mrs. Jenks to know—just drinking to excess.

"Ours," Mrs. Jenks said quietly, "is delivered. By the case."

"Yes, I know," Myra said.

"Four cases a month, plus the mixes."

"Yes, I know. I've seen the truck."

"We use an incredible amount of ice."

Myra was deep in thought as the two women pushed their purchases across the parking lot to their cars—parked side by side, Myra noted without surprise. The police, she was thinking. Wife-beating is against the law. Her friend Sergeant Bellows would be interested in knowing about Jenks. But the complaint would have to come from the wife, not her. She faced the smaller woman. Mrs. Jenks said unexpectedly, in her birdlike voice, "My, it's a lovely day, isn't it? Are you going boating?"

"Boating?"

"Yes. I've seen you there—at Babcock Park—on the pond."

"You have?"

"Yes. Several times." Mrs. Jenks's eyes dropped again.

"You followed me there?" A touch of indignation was in Myra's voice.

"No—oh, no! I go there myself sometimes, just to get away for a few minutes. I've seen you rowing on the pond."

"Oh. Well, yes, I enjoy it," Myra said. She didn't add: now that I'm denied my garden.

"So does Harry."

"What? Mr. Jenks?"

"Yes. We used to go there often, but we can't any more."

"Why?"

"Not since my back."

"What about your back?"

Mrs. Jenks placed a reflexive hand over a kidney. "I can't handle the oars since he hit me—here."

"You mean *you* rowed *him*?"

"Yes."

"My God in heaven! When did he hit you there?"

"A year ago. Just before we moved next door to you."

"Did you report it to the police? I know this sergeant—"

"No—oh, no! I wouldn't dare do that!"

Myra breathed out a barrel of air. She'd never been as incensed in her life. The thought of that gross beast being rowed around the pond by this slender, battered woman was the ultimate in infamy to her. She breathed again, massively. "Something," she said, "must be done."

"You could row him," Mrs. Jenks said.

"Me?"

"Yes—he's mentioned it."

"Mentioned what?"

"That you could perhaps row him—"

"That I—" Pure astonishment blocked Myra's voice. "That I— Whatever gave him that idea?"

"I mentioned once that I'd seen you there."

Myra bristled. "The very last thing I can ever see myself doing," she said, "is rowing that—that obscenity around Babcock's pond. What would be the point?"

Mrs. Jenks had unlocked the trunk of her car and was placing bags of groceries inside. She didn't look at Myra. "He can't swim," she said, almost to herself. "Harry can't swim."

Mrs. Jenks had straightened from her task. Now she gazed across the vast parking lot of the shopping center, a distant vision in her eyes. "Just an outing in the park," she said dreamily. "I'd pay for the boat rental."

It was a fine weekend, and Myra, much shaken by her encounter with Mrs. Jenks, resolved to proceed with her life as though the Jenkses didn't exist, as though nothing had disturbed the pleasant, useful cycle of her days.

But of course it didn't work.

By noon on Saturday, determinedly on her knees in front of a future petunia bed at the deepest corner of her yard, her trowel poised over the soil, she found her every sense on the alert, waiting. It had been twenty minutes and more. The trowel trembled in her hand, her breathing was shallow. And then it came: "Sweetheart, I'm dry!" and the trowel dropped from her hand as the tankard clanged down on the table. *Impossible!* she thought. She labored to her feet, suddenly feeling older by
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years. She stood still for a long moment gathering her breath and then walked the length of her yard along the wire fence that separated hers from the Jenkses'.

Her stride broke and then she stopped as she saw Mrs. Jenks emerge from her kitchen door, a fresh tankard in one hand, a bowl of the junk he stuffed into his mouth all day in the other. Their eyes met, locked, flinched away, locked again, and Myra's chin went up and down a quarter-inch.

Jenks, seated in his beautifully engineered chair, was oblivious, a centerfold spread out on the table before him. Myra stepped to the fence and cleared her throat.

"I understand," she said, "that you like to go boating in the park." She looked into Jenks's turgid drinker's face, the cheeks cross-hatched with scarlet veins. He took the cigar from his mouth.

"Any time," he said. "The Missus told me—"

Mrs. Jenks stepped forward briskly and put his drink and snack bowl on the table with a flourish, a gay waitress swing to her bony hips. She didn't look at Myra.

"Monday," Myra said huskily. "How about Monday afternoon?"

"Sure," Jenks said. "Come on over—have a drink. Let's talk about it."

"I have something in the oven. A pie." Myra had to clear her throat again. "Monday, then," she said, and turned and walked stiff-legged to her kitchen door.

A Rubicon crossed? Myra, a former librarian, dealt sometimes in metaphor. In her kitchen she tested herself. No sweat on her brow, her heart quiet in her breast, calm as a frozen pond. A pond—yes. Babcock's Pond. The library was across the street from the park and through the long years she'd frequently rowed for a half hour during her lunch break. Sometimes she'd eaten her sandwich afloat. She knew every yard of the pond, its deeps and shallows. A small island, graced with tall eucalyptus trees, was in the center. She'd rowed around it a hundred times. The far side was obscured from general view. There, she thought, was the ideal place; and then she said aloud, "I'm planning a murder," testing the sound of it, its meaning. "I'm planning a murder."

What was the most popular section in the library? The murder-mystery section, Agatha Christie titles spreading six feet along one shelf, Ellery Queen, Rex Stout, Hugh Pentecost—a thousand titles. She had read

dozens of them herself, she and tens of thousands of murder fans. *We love it!* Now the sweat popped on her brow and her heart began to pound.

She took a deep breath and moved to the window over the sink. Jenks had the tankard to his lips, draining it. Had it been twenty minutes, for heaven's sake? The tankard slammed down on the metal table and the bray sounded. "Sweetheart, I'm dry!" The last syllables were blocked as Myra drove a finger into each ear.

She went limp, sagged against the edge of the sink.

Me? No, never!

She straightened, squared her shoulders; wiped her brow. She had said she had a pie in the oven—it was a lie. She despised lies and liars. She got out flour, sugar, a jar of peaches she'd put up last June from her own tree, bowls, wax paper, a rolling pin, pans. She would mitigate her lie, erase it. She couldn't murder him—she knew that now. But she could talk to him, one human being to another—and as God was her stern and unrelenting judge, she would.

Monday was fine and clear at the park. Mrs. Jenks had made sandwiches and brought bags of potato chips. She served them vivaciously at the picnic table by the shore, her face flushed. Jenks had brought a gallon thermos jug of a rum concoction and his tankard. He ate and drank as he always did, steadily, rhythmically, a Hawaiian print shirt draped over his huge torso, baggy Bermuda shorts reaching to his knees, a planter's straw hat on his head, dark glasses bridging his bulbous nose, his cigar burning on the edge of the table as he ate, its blue plume of smoke coiling snakelike around Myra's head.

She'd rented a boat earlier and rowed it ashore ten feet from their table. Finished eating, she faced him and said, "Well now, Mr. Jenks—what about our voyage?"

"What about it?" he said. He lit a fresh cigar, grasped his thermos and tankard, and levered to his feet. "Let's cast off the lines, me hearty."

His heft was too much. The small boat almost drew water at the stern where he sat, and Myra, no lightweight herself, rowed with steeply oblique oars, the prow two feet in the air. It was hard going as she aimed for the island.

"A point or two to starboard, helmsman," Jenks said. "You're heading dead-on a landfall." They were fifty feet from shore, out of earshot.

"You're an awful man," Myra said, "a terrible man." She'd been saving

up all weekend to tell him off. "I can't condone a wife-beater. You're a despicable man!"

"A wife-beater?" Jenks said affably. "Who says I'm a wife-beater?"

"Your wife says so—your victim."

"I never laid a hand on her, neighbor."

"You ruined her back," Myra said. "She used to row you around this pond, but she can't any more because you ruined her back. Besides, you're a drunk!"

"I've never been drunk in my life," Jenks said. He smiled a Bacchus smile. "On the other hand, I haven't been sober for thirty years. Thelma makes things up, neighbor."

"She didn't make *you* up. You're a self-made—*product* if ever I saw one."

"We all are, neighbor—the best of us, the least of us. The secret is to relax and enjoy yourself, whatever you are."

"Philosophy!" Myra snorted. "From a drunk!"

"A drinker—there's a difference. And besides—*in vino veritas*. Right oar, helmsperson, or you'll put us ashore on the island."

Myra dug the right oar deep into the water, nearly spinning the tiny craft on its point of gravity, which was directly beneath Jenks's massive behind. The boat was almost impossible to control, the situation ludicrous—comic, Myra decided suddenly. The whole year had been ludicrous, a comedy, but she'd made a tragedy of it, allowing this buffoon to ruin her peace of mind. She was appalled at the power he'd gained over her—that she'd allowed him to gain over her.

"My Lord in heaven," she muttered.

"Eh?"

"Nothing. I was talking to someone else."

He had the tankard gripped between his knees and was filling it from the thermos, the eternal cigar clamped between his teeth. Twenty minutes, she thought. Like clockwork. She studied him, bemused, freeing herself from his malignant hold. She felt at ease, exorcised, the oars digging into the water at last with equal thrust, the boat surging forward at every stroke. Each of us is his own captain, she thought. "Jenks," she said conversationally, "how come you bang that damn tankard down on the table every time you want a drink?"

"To get her attention, neighbor. She's a mulish woman. It's either that or a two-by-four."

Mrs. Jenks was leaning against the picnic table, sixty yards away now. She was watching them—rigid, attentive, waiting.

"If I asked you to," Myra said, "would you quit hollering every time you want a drink, quit banging that damn tankard on the table?"

"Never," Jenks said pontifically, "interfere with a system that works." He was still carefully filling the tankard—and then it happened. The cigar had gone sideways in his mouth. He reached for it with his left hand and the gallon jug in his right, counter-balancing the left in the unsteady boat, dropped into the pond. Jenks, grabbing at it as though it were the Holy Grail, followed it into the water.

He sank like a stone.

"My God!" Myra breathed as the boat swung erratically beneath her. She fought for control, digging hard with the left oar to bring the craft about. She shouted at Mrs. Jenks to get help and pulled mightily on the oars. Jenks's hat was floating fifteen feet away, bubbles bursting from the murky depths of the pond. "Get help!" Myra screamed again, but Mrs. Jenks had turned and was sorting out the debris of their lunch.

There was nothing to rue, nothing to regret, no effort that she could have made that she hadn't made, no guilt. But there'd been movement in her heart, a painful growth. An acceptance. Jenks had gone down like an anchor; a seaman's death, possibly welcome to him. Like most drunks, she thought, quoting Keats to herself, he was half in love with easeful death. There was comfort in the thought; but then she wondered again, as she would for a long time, if she could not have turned the boat back faster than she did. Little is ever of one tidy piece.

She had spoken very little to Mrs. Jenks since the drowning—a few words at the inquest, a few words before, fewer after. Mrs. Jenks was moving now—ten days after the funeral. A man, grey-haired, straight-backed, a typical Navy retiree, was helping her. Three or four times Myra saw him carry things to his car: potted plants, a few books, dresses. Myra had been used—she understood that fully—but she didn't feel used. Things happen, and leave you stronger or weaker, depending. She felt stronger.

She had faith that her garden would prosper again and that right would win in the end—if right could ever be defined. But not soon, she thought; there would be many battles between now and then. She girded herself. She was always girding herself . . .

SWEETHEART, I'M DRY!

The new people moved in on the first day of the following month. Myra watched from her front window as a rickety stakeback truck pulled into the drive next door. It was loaded with tatty-looking furniture, a mattress roped across the top like a brimless hat. The woman got out first, carrying a child in her arms. The woman's hair fell to her waist. She wore wash-paled jeans, sandals, a blue workshirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. The child was crying.

The man got out a moment later. He had on the same sort of clothes but wore jackboots on his feet. He had long hair and a full beard. He walked to the back of the truck, fumbled there for a while, and then carried a set of snare drums across the front lawn to the door of the house.

Myra sighed her fighter's stoic sigh.

She went into her kitchen, worked up a peach pie, and put it in the oven.

Then she went outside, shovel in hand, and took up digging the rich, composty earth in the bed alongside the wire fence. In another two or three days she'd have it completely turned and ready for seed. It had lain fallow for a year, but it never would again.

There are ways, Myra thought, there are always ways. And help from strange sources.

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Marriage, in life, is like a duel in the midst of a battle . . .

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY

by

**JULIA
DeHAHN**



When Wanda Christopher (née Lewis) learned that her husband was on vacation with another woman and not on a business trip only a little more than a year after their wedding, she was stunned, hurt, and first of a mind to leave him or throw him out. But thinking it through the next few days before his return, she decided to wait it out, not let on that she knew, and see what came of it. In the meantime she would gather her resources in case it came to the worst.

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY

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She loved Ed. He was a lovable man—both needy and strong, a great provider, a great romancer, and—until this sudden horror—the very soul of consideration. His courtship of her had taken her breath away, and that of their friends, with its show of imagination and devotion. No, not show—he had done it all quietly, without show (the irresistible invitation, the right word at precisely the right time, the exquisitely chosen gift that arrived at the perfect moment). It was all so exciting that it was Wanda who had shared it with their friends.

And it hadn't stopped with the wedding. If anything, he had become even more lavish with his time and money after they were married. He seemed to expand in the confines of their home, which had grown charming and cozy with the furnishings they had painstakingly bought and built for it together.

Three days a week Wanda commuted with Ed by train to the city, where she worked for a talent agency on West Fifty-seventh Street. Ed was a partner in a law firm downtown. The rest of the week she stuck close to home, polishing, sewing, gardening, cooking. They had a large circle of friends and entertained often. Once or twice a week, on the days Wanda worked in the city, they stayed in late for dinner and sometimes took in a play or a movie.

The totality of their relationship made the news of Ed's deception all the more devastating—and Wanda's decision to look the other way all the more understandable. Could she live without him? Was there another man in the world who could ever mean as much to her as he did?

To her amazement, she found she was able to carry it off. Not without a trembling inner anger and fear, she responded genuinely to his warm advances the afternoon he returned, and believed him when he told her he had missed her even more than he'd thought possible.

As it turned out, she had cause to believe him. She had learned of his duplicity from one of their friends, Priscilla Smith, whose husband Oscar had overheard Ed making plans for the illicit vacation with a married woman who commuted to and from New York on the same train. Priscilla seemed more shocked by Ed's lack of circumspection than by his treachery.

On the Friday of the week following Ed's return, Priscilla called to tell Wanda that Oscar had observed Ed and the woman being icily polite on the train those days Wanda didn't ride in with Ed (as well as the days

she did). Although it was possible they were putting on an act—however late—to cover up their true feelings, Oscar suspected their liaison had been merely a brief fling and that the honeymoon, so to speak, was over.

Reminding herself that we easily believe that which we wish (Wanda was a dedicated collector of aphorisms), Wanda settled back and relaxed, glad she hadn't faced Ed with her knowledge. The first defense of weak minds, after all, is to recriminate. For a while she watched him when they were in the company of a new woman, but outside of his usual jovial enjoyment of all women he treated her and their life together with the same fervor as always and she gradually dismissed his infidelity as a one-time aberration, an experiment that had failed, better forgotten by her if not by him.

Until the call came from Priscilla three months later. This time it was a girl who worked in the Wall Street area, a girl some years younger than Ed.

"Did Ed work late last night?" Priscilla had begun.

"Yes," Wanda had answered offhandedly. There was a silence at the other end of the wire and Wanda had felt a flinch of fear. "Why?"

"Oh, Wanda, why do I have to be the one to tell you?" Priscilla had whined. "It's just that Oscar's seen Ed lunching practically every day with this *loose*-looking young girl for a couple of weeks now and last night they were kissing at the station when Oscar was catching the last train back."

"Did *Oscar* work late?" Wanda asked resentfully.

"I don't blame you for that, believe me," Priscilla said. "I deserve it. I really don't know why I'm telling you, or why I told you last time. Except I think I'd want to know if Oscar ever strayed." She paused. "To be *very* honest, I'd like to think his telling me about Ed means he wouldn't play around himself."

"Play around," Wanda said wistfully.

"That's all it is," Priscilla reassured her. "Ed's never grown up, Wanda. It's part of his charm. He's a teddy bear. Women can't resist him and he responds to that. It has nothing to do with you. My analyst says that nine times out of ten when a married man plays around it has nothing to do with the wife."

"Your analyst sounds like a male chauvinist."

"She's a woman. I took her to mean the opposite's true as well—a

married woman who takes a lover is no less in love with her husband."

"Tell that to her husband."

Priscilla sighed. "Why I really phoned was to ask if you and Ed are free to come for dinner a week from tomorrow night."

"If I can tear him away from this girl, I think we can."

"Oh, Wanda."

At the Smiths' the following weekend, Wanda wondered at the congeniality that prevailed between herself and Ed, alone and with friends. It surprised her and she was curious as to where the strength to look the other way came from. On second thought, maybe it wasn't a strength, maybe it was the vague part of her nature coming to her aid. It had driven her parents and teachers crazy.

"How many times am I going to have to tell you to look both ways?" she remembered her mother. "I'm never going to be able to let you cross the street alone, never. When I die they'll have to call in the Boy Scouts."

"Don't look to the *left*," her father had instructed her crossly when he was teaching her to drive. "The street you're about to turn into is one-way from the right. That's where the traffic's coming from, see?"

"You're looking out the window again, Wanda," teachers all through grade school had admonished her. "Pay attention!"

And she had learned not to drift quite so much—to focus and observe and get to the heart of things. To the degree she managed to graduate from a major women's college with high honors.

Weeks passed before Priscilla mentioned the girl to Wanda again and she was obviously exasperated to have to be the one to bring her up. "Aren't you interested?" she asked impatiently as they drove home from an evening trip to the supermarket.

"I'm trying not to think about it."

"Can you? Can you *do* that? I wouldn't be able to think of anything else. I'd be seething all the time."

"We boil at different degrees," Wanda aphorized. She braked for a stop sign, started to look the wrong way, and quickly reversed her attention in the direction of the oncoming flow of cars on the one-way street they were about to enter.

"Well, for your information it's over," Priscilla said. "Ed's not seeing that girl any more."

"How do you know?" Wanda's heart lifted. She tried to hide it but she felt grateful to Priscilla—fiercely grateful. It was the second time she had lifted this awful weight from her heart.

"He's seeing another one," Priscilla said. "Oscar says she's a knockout."

For days she drifted, answering Ed comment for comment, smile for smile, sexual overture for sexual overture, thinking, Jealousy is the great exaggerator. She found herself drinking a little more and sparkling a little more at parties, both of which she curbed when it brought her unwanted attention from Ed's friends.

"I swear Oscar's getting eyes for you," Priscilla said one Sunday night as the two of them returned for seconds at a buffet dinner at the Alfreds'. "I hope you're not going to start emulating your husband's behavior."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Wanda said airily.

"Just because *he* has to act out is no reason for *you* to act out," Priscilla continued.

"Right," Wanda agreed. "To hell with the asparagus," and she went back to the table, where Ed threw her a brilliant smile of love and promise. The eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears, she thought, smiling back.

Then came the phone call from Babs Powers, a sportswriter whose artist husband, Jake, had been Wanda's friend since fifth grade when he had won first prize in the annual poster contest and she first prize in the annual essay contest.

"Wanda—" Babs came right to the point "—are you aware of what Priscilla Smith and your husband are up to?"

It took Wanda several moments to find her voice. "Planning a surprise birthday party for me?"

"I don't blame you," Babs said. "I don't blame you. But it won't last—you know that. Forgive me if I've pained you but I stuck my neck out because I for one would want to know if Jake ever fooled around."

"Fooled around," Wanda echoed.

"What?"

"I said don't worry about it. If Jake ever fooled around there are quite a few people who would be delighted to let you know."

She waited, reflecting that the malicious have a dark happiness and

that for the disconcerting actions of our fellow men we rarely discover the motive. Eventually the call came from Priscilla.

"Do you know why I've been out of touch, you ostrich?" she began.

"Have you been out of touch?" Wanda said vaguely.

"You know damn well I have. You just pretend to be an ostrich. I haven't called you because Ed and I have been having a thing! A fantastic, crazy, beautiful—" her voice dropped "—short-lived thing."

"Acting out," Wanda said. "Never mind. Remember, it has nothing to do with Oscar."

"Has anybody, anytime, anywhere, *ever* gotten a rise out of you?" Priscilla yelled. Then, with an obvious effort to calm down: "I'm calling to say this. We have a long-standing invitation to come there to dinner tonight. You and Ed seem to be able to put on a placid act in spite of everything that's happened, but I'm not sure I can. Do you still want us to come, knowing what you know, or do you want to give Ed our regrets, say we're sick?"

"Both of you?"

"One of us, both of us!" Priscilla's voice rose again. "I wish you'd stop acting so cool when we both know you'd like to kill me."

"Do what you like about tonight," Wanda told her. "I have everything practically ready but it won't go to waste."

"Of course it will! Ed hates leftovers!" Priscilla offered a full thirty seconds of silence. "Never mind, we'll be over—but I won't be responsible for the consequences." She hung up.

Men's vows are women's traitors, Wanda thought, flouncing back to the kitchen.

One passion is never cured by another, she complained, feeding carrots into the food processor, and, almost jamming the machine with the force of the feedings: If you're afraid of loneliness, don't marry.

She crossed to the table and measured flour furiously. A hurtful act is the transference to others of the degradation which we bear in ourselves. Bringing the flour to the stove, she blended it viciously with the hot butter simmering in a saucepan.

Splashing warm milk into the frothy roux, she whisked it murderously, thinking would that just once she could be untrue to herself.

For a moment she paused, trying to think if there were any suspicious mushrooms in the woods nearby that she might add to the vegetable

casserole, then she shook her head no. Revenge, at first thought sweet, bitter ere long back on itself recoils.

Besides, there wasn't time.

The evening went smoothly enough, considering Priscilla's nervous tension. Ed and Oscar talked more than usual between themselves, about shortages and shoddy spacecraft, while Wanda and Priscilla half listened, curled up in separate chairs, swirling brandy. When the two men veered off onto the subject of sports, by way of the Knicks, Priscilla came instantly alert and asked if anyone besides herself would be interested in a weekend at Lake Placid sometime soon. It would make the Olympics all the more colorful to watch on television if they had been there and had a look around.

While the men discussed it Wanda thought, Better put a strong fence round the top of the cliff than an ambulance down in the valley, and wondered which of them Priscilla had in mind as her victim.

They left on a Friday evening and arrived early Saturday afternoon after an overnight stopover in Saratoga, sharing a car because of the fuel crisis—the Smiths' car, at Priscilla's insistence. "It was my idea," she reminded Wanda brightly. "The next trip can be on you."

Ho, Wanda thought. She was certain she knew what Priscilla had up her cunningly fit sleeve but, not knowing the status of Priscilla's relationship with Ed, she couldn't figure out who she had in mind for the deed. Ed? Oscar? Herself? Some combination thereof?

It was a beautifully clear October day and they toured Olympic Village for most of the afternoon, then returned to the car, Priscilla at the wheel, for a ride to and around Whiteface Mountain.

As the road grew steeper and narrower, Wanda's old vertigo returned and she fastened her eyes to the side of the road away from the abrupt declines to the right.

Exclaiming over the colorful view at every turn, Priscilla finally pulled to a halt at a particularly awesome spot and said, "Everybody out—we can't take this in from the car."

They all climbed out and started toward a piece of high ground surrounded on three sides by an all-too-brief guard rail. Wanda refused Ed's arm and kept cautiously apart from him and the others.

"Wow, look at that," Ed said, going straight to the guard rail and

looking down at the lake nestled at the base of the sheer drop.

"God, it makes me sick to look down there," Oscar said, peering over from a distance. "That would be some rugged fall, man, and a watery reception if you managed to make it alive to the bottom."

"Don't be a sissy," Priscilla laughed. "Come over here. You too, Wanda. Don't be a baby. Don't look down, look *up*. It's magnificent."

Moving warily toward the edge, his eyes to the ground, Oscar missed seeing his wife push Ed forward with all her strength. Ed tripped awkwardly over the rail and went down the almost vertical slope making sounds similar to laughter—"Oh? Oh! Hahahaaa—"

Wanda started to look away, then, swallowing her dizziness, she rushed at Priscilla, who had adopted a theatrical expression of shock, and whacked her hard on the back, sending her over the edge after Ed.

Turning away, she encountered Oscar's horrified face looking down at the tumbling bodies, neither of which were yet anywhere near splash-down. Why not? she thought—Priscilla could drag down two men trying to save her as well as one—and she shoved him after them.

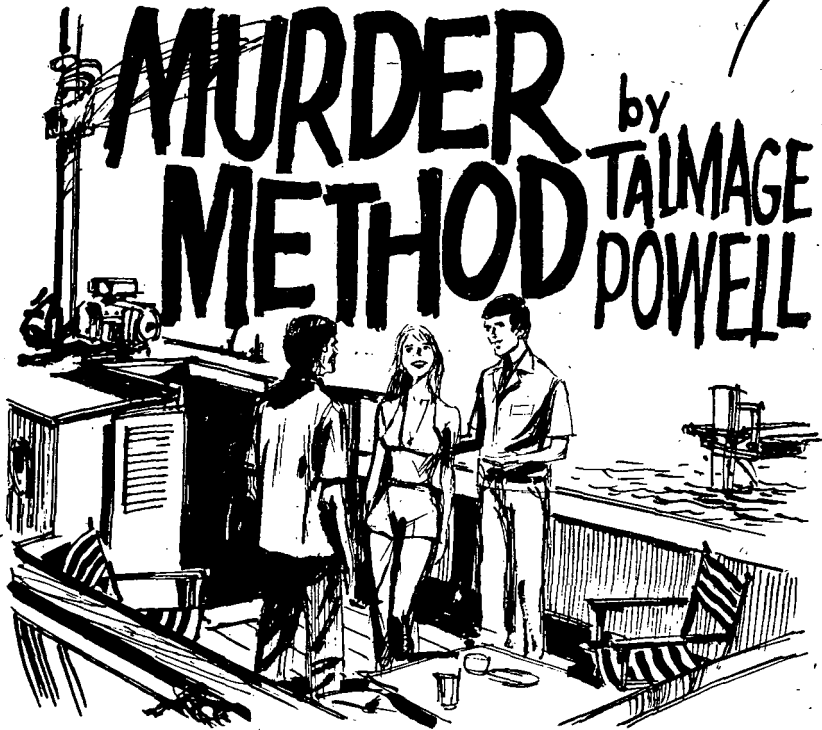
After a moment, hearing the first faraway but distinct splash, she ran back to the car, decided she was too nauseated to drive, and sped back down the mountain on foot, hugging the side of the road away from the edge, thinking, I have the strength of twenty because my heart is pure. Then, frowning, she reduced her pace and searched her memory for something more appropriate.

It came. Terrible consequences there will always be when the mean vices attempt to mimic the grand passions.

Still, she broke into a run again. It wouldn't do to encounter help in a less than breathless state.

The February 27 Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale January 31.

Ralph Corson wasn't the friendliest man alive . . .



We killed her, Ralph Corson and I, as surely as if we had used a knife or a gun, and it is the manner of the killing that haunts and torments me.

I met Peri in Miami. She was the wife of as good a friend as I ever had.

It was right after I lost my shirt in an orange deal. I'd bought a bunch of futures in oranges, and a freeze had killed the crop. I was sitting in a small waterfront tavern, making wet rings on the bar with a beer glass

MURDER METHOD

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and wondering what to do next, when a man walked up behind me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Tom Danton," he said in a quiet voice. "It's good to see you after such a long time."

I turned on the bar stool and felt better right away. Marty Janus had always affected me that way, even in our college days.

A subtle change came over any room Marty entered. He was a dark, good-looking, slender, energetic man, but it wasn't his looks that did it. It was the Marty Janus dwelling deep in the flesh and bones, the Marty who believed in the beauties and joys of life, the worth of life, the worth, decency, and integrity of his fellow man.

But by no stretch of the imagination was Marty a dreamy starry-eyed fool. He was smart, tough, courageous. The occasional individual who tried to take advantage of him because of his outlook, social position, and wealth failed to sour Marty. He accepted them as part of the world and time into which he had been born and felt sorry for them.

In short, Marty was a rare man. I suspect that if and when Marty's kind become the majority, most of the world's ills will vanish along with fear and hatred.

"Sit down," I said. "I'm buying."

"Thanks. You're looking fit, Tom." A smile crinkled the deeply tanned flesh at the corners of his eyes. "Fifteen years out of college, and I'll bet you could still do a broken field run that would make the other team dizzy."

"If I had Marty Janus with me as a blocking back," I said.

"Hell," he laughed, "you're just saying it because it's true. I heard you were in Miami, Tom. Wanted very much to see you. What you been doing for yourself?"

"I dropped my roll on some oranges."

"That's too bad. Married yet?"

"Nope."

"Business deal lined up?"

"Not so far."

"No strings on you—O.K., so we'll go fishing. We'll get the kinks out of our systems, the cobwebs out of the old brains, and figure out an assault on the future."

"Thanks, Marty, but I . . ."

"I'm planning a trip. A real jaunt. You enjoy fishing?"

Tropical water, a brilliant sun, the roll of a boat, the big ones hitting . . .
"Are you kidding, Marty?"

"Then it's settled."

"No," I said. "I meant it when I said I dropped my roll. I couldn't make a down payment on the bait."

"The heat's got him," Marty said to no one, "so how can I consider it an insult?" He turned and looked at me. "All right, you're broke. Think of the advantage in that. You can face the future, enter the next round of the scrap with everything to gain, not a thing to lose. Check?"

"I suppose." He wasn't simply a wealthy man talking from a lofty position of security. Marty would never have to worry about money; but he'd made it honestly, because he'd been smart enough to know the time and place for his subdivisions and because people couldn't be in the state a week without knowing you'd get your money's worth if you bought a home in a Janus development.

As a kid he'd lived on a Florida farm with sneakers as his Sunday shoes. He'd waited on tables, studied like a Socrates, and played football to get himself through college. He'd worked on construction jobs in South American jungles and mountains and lived on beans for two years to get his first tiny capital together.

"I suppose," he echoed, "Tomas, muchacho, that proves it. You need open sky and fresh air to put some vigor in your outlook. I got a boat docked no more than a couple of blocks from here. I was on my way to the marine supply house when I glanced in here, did a double-take, and realized it was really you. The gear can wait. I want you to see the new boat, the *Peri*. It's named after my wife."

If you knew Marty really well, you could catch the faint inflection when he said "my wife." He said it with a vast and deep contentment, as if life, after this, could only be perfect; never topping itself.

Water sparkled in the slips and lapped gently against the pilings. The masts of the yachts made a forest of clean, slender spears against the deep blue of the sky. Marty and I paused at a slip. He looked at me with a grin.

The *Peri* crouched at her moorings. She gleamed, mahogany and brass, all forty feet of her. She was sloop rigged, her cabins low, her bridge straining toward the open sea, her engine housings built for diesel auxiliaries.

I shared Marty's grin. "She makes you feel like a Viking."

"That she does," Marty said.

We went down the short gangway onto the deck. A girl came from aft, out of the cabin. Marty went forward to meet her, taking her hand in his.

A magazine illustrator couldn't have done the portrait better. She was lithe and graceful in white shorts and halter, carrying the vigorous animalism of her sex appeal quite unconsciously.

She was gold, while Marty was dark-tanned leather. His coloring made her hair seem more golden, her eyes bluer, and her hair and eyes possibly made her lips seem redder than they really were. The top of her head came just above Marty's shoulder, and she leaned against him slightly in an automatic little gesture of affection.

"Peri," Marty said, "this is Tom Danton. Tom, my wife."

She offered her hand. Her fingers were slim, cool, strong. "I'm very pleased to know you, Tom. Marty has told me a great deal about you."

I said something or other and let go of her hand.

Marty told her I was joining the trip, and she remarked that it was nice.

"Bring your stuff on board this afternoon, Tom," Marty said. "We'll get underway with the tide tomorrow morning."

The rubber soles of white canvas shoes squeaked softly behind me on the hot planking of the deck.

I looked over my shoulder. A man had come aboard. Wearing a T-shirt, ducks, and an old yachting cap, he was long, heavy, big-chested in the body and short in the legs. His face was square, his features blunt. His eyes were black and small, or perhaps they only looked that way because of his black, jutting, heavy brows.

He stood spread-legged, as if the deck of a boat were home to him. He took off the cap, with the inverted V crimped in the cracked bill, and wiped the sweatband. "You get to the marine supplier, Mr. Janus?"

"Not yet, Ralph. We'll go over there now," Marty said. "I ran into a friend. He's going with us. Tom Danton, Ralph Corson."

The stocky man looked me up and down, offered his hard, callused hand for a brief shake. "Glad to have you, Mr. Danton." There was neither welcome nor disrespect in his tone. "You know anything about sailing?"

"A little."

"He'll pull his share," Marty said.

"Then we won't need another hired hand?"

"I think not, Ralph."

The stocky man shrugged and went aft.

"He's not the friendliest man alive," Marty said, so that Ralph Corson wouldn't hear, "but he's a competent seaman."

I soon found out that Marty had told the truth about Corson. We fished our way down the Keys. Corson knew his business, and I didn't mind taking his orders and instructions. But in less than a week, I'd begun to hate the man.

I couldn't single out a reason for this feeling. It wasn't in anything he actually said or did. His orders were peremptory, even to Marty. That was all right, as it should be. Out here, Corson was captain of the boat.

Nor was the reason particularly in Corson's attitude toward me. He treated me as something of a cluck, a habit of sea-wise men toward the landlubber. To him, I was no more than a shadow aboard. Still, this was not enough to arouse the feeling I felt for him.

Then late one afternoon, I knew suddenly why I felt as I did. The Atlantic was as smooth as a tub of oil. Sea and sky were hushed, and I had the feeling that we were in a vacuum. We were making for port in Key West under the power of the auxiliaries because of the expected light blow. Corson was on the bridge, at the helm.

Everything aboard the *Peri* was secured. Marty's wife had made sandwiches for dinner, and there was nothing to be done, aside from Corson's task. Peri and Marty were forward, sitting very close together in deck chairs. They were talking to each other, but their tones were low and intimate and could not be heard above the steady whisper of the diesels.

They made a fine picture, sea and sky for a backdrop, she like an enticing golden thing that had come out of the sea and Marty like the hero from some book who'd captured her mind, body, and soul. Marty said something to her, and they looked at each other. And Corson stood looking at their profiles, and a bestial thing came to his face.

He didn't know I was watching. I'd been at the stern. He hadn't heard me come forward. I'd been on the point of speaking to him when that change had come to his face. His eyes glittered, his lips pulled back tight to show his teeth. Dark blood suffused the heavy planes of his cheeks and jaws.

His lips twisted as he spoke noiseless words to himself. I could guess that it was a speech of raw animal desire and hatred. Lust for the woman and hatred, arising from envy, of the man who could own her, and this boat, and the services of other people.

I turned and went quietly sternward. I went in the galley and mixed a drink for something to do. There was a suffocating feeling in my chest and a band of steel tightening about my temples.

I shook with my hatred for Corson.

Because I wanted the woman as badly as he did.

The revelation was not sudden, though it seemed so at the moment. It filled me with a quick and deep shame.

Marty was my friend—and she was a part of Marty. Not for a moment was there any doubt of that. She didn't worship or idolize him. She simply belonged to him, completely, without reservation. She wanted nothing more. She would never ask nor seek for anything more. She had found the ultimate purpose of womanhood, a personality into which her own being could fuse until the two became a single entity.

Her life had a single mainstream and anything else—Corson and I, for example—were just objects on the distant shores of that stream.

So she was blameless. And yet she was wholly to blame, for in her, Marty had found the thing that every man seeks, the realization of the idealistic wish every man has felt to some degree when he was very young.

Corson and I had discovered there really was a woman like this in the world. It stirred the senses and fanned a fire, because there was the emptiness of the sea and sky, the smallness of the boat, the endless languorous days and nights—and the sight of her continually dangled before Corson and me.

I wanted to leave them in Key West. Instead, I told myself I couldn't do it gracefully.

Although the season was late and there were reports of squally weather, Marty aimed the *Peri* at the Gulf, where he heard a few tarpon were still running.

"Those running this late," he decided, "will be monsters. We might even set a record!"

The weather reports weren't exaggerated, and the fifth day out, Corson asked Marty to make for Fort Myers.

"There's even rougher weather ahead," Corson said, "and this craft ain't as seaworthy as she looks. She's been built for looks, Mr. Janus—to . . ."

"Yes, Corson?"

"All right," Corson said, rubbing his palms on his ducks, "I'll say it. The *Peri*'s a tub. I suspected it from the second I looked at her. Now I know it. She was built to grab a rich landlubber's dollars. There's too much of her topside. I don't like the way she handles. I don't like the roll of her. As a fancy toy, she's fine, but it'd take a lot better craft than the *Peri* to weather the blow moving up from Dry Tortugas."

"Well," Marty said, "I guess I'm not the first man to get stuck." He grinned wryly. "Nor the last. We'll put in at Fort Myers."

We failed to reach the port. The heavy blow caught us off the unexplored wilderness shown on the charts as Ten Thousand Islands.

The darkness and wind and rain came quickly. The tropical hush was filled with a roar. The sky disappeared, and the seas came over the *Peri*'s deck.

Just before the blow hit, Corson had seen the smudge of an island on our portside horizon. He swung the *Peri* wide, making for the island.

When the leaden sky came down to meet the angry sea, the island disappeared. Corson put the nose of the craft into the teeth of the wind and tried to hold her there. She kept sheering off, rolling heavily, like a creature alive and wanting to flee in panic.

The rain was icy after the heat of the day. One moment the diesels labored so hard it seemed they would quit; the next, they tried to tear themselves out of their mountings as the prow of the *Peri* wallowed heavily and the screws screamed free.

It was up to Corson now.

We stayed topside, *Peri* at Marty's side, keeping her fear under tight control.

The *Peri* shuddered as she crested, the wind tearing at her. She fell like a toboggan, her stern free, her prow slicing to the depths of the watery trough. She met the wall of water with a booming crash. Her stability was gone; and the water swept her decks clean, pouring into her depths.

I heard *Peri* scream Marty's name. Then panic blanked everything else from my mind as the world turned to angry black water.

I felt Corson's weight slam into me. His arms grabbed for me. I slugged at him and clawed my way toward the surface.

Something hard slammed against my shoulder. I grabbed it, locked my arms about it. We'd all had on life preservers, of course, but they wouldn't keep a man from drowning in this weather. The short length of broken mast helped.

I was under the surface more often than not as the water roiled over me. But I was alive, and I clung to the mast and gagged out water—and heard her cry out Marty's name once again. It was a very feeble cry, but I knew she must be close. The human voice was no competition for the angry bellow of the wind.

I glimpsed her face, a few feet away. I worked the mast toward her. I felt the dizzying pitching and knew another mass of water was coiled over us. I grabbed her arm. As we went under, she was almost torn away. The water parted, and she put her arms across the mast, gagging and coughing. She never stopped saying his name for long. Only when there was no breath in her did she refrain from calling for Marty.

I felt the warm sand of a beach beneath my back, and opened my eyes. The sky was blue, bland, capriciously innocent. There was a stillness, broken only by the light surf breaking with faint, rasping sounds.

I sat up, remembering the blow, the touch of solid bottom beneath my feet. Remembering that I had dragged her with me until I'd collapsed.

My wild, swinging gaze jerked to a halt. She lay near me. I could almost reach out and touch her. She was a carved, golden image there on the quiet beach.

As I stood up, she stirred. She looked at me blankly. Then her eyes darkened, deepened. She sat up and looked toward the sea.

"We made it to the island," I said.

"Marty . . ." she said.

"Maybe he made it too."

She didn't look at me. "No," she said. "He didn't."

I knelt beside her and touched her shoulder. "Don't borrow trouble. Let's not decide about Marty until we know for sure."

She sat looking at the sea, not feeling my touch.

A voice from down the beach called, "Hallo, there!"

The sea still held her attention, for it was Ralph Corson's voice she heard.

He came walking up the beach, his clothing stiff with salt and sand. He stood breathing heavily. "I've been looking for you. I was beginning to think I was the only one who made it."

"There's no sign of Marty," she said.

"No," Corson said.

She made no move, sitting as if nothing could surprise or hurt her.

"We're on the island," Corson said. "It appears to be a sizeable strip of land. I reckon we're somewhere southwest by south of Ten Thousand Islands. I think we can manage, until somebody picks us up."

He looked down at her. "We've got some immediate problems to think about."

"I'll be all right," she said dully. "Just give me a little while."

Corson jerked his head. I followed him as he moved away. We walked toward the interior of the island. It was heavily grown with palms, palmetto, low brush. As we moved into the jungle, I said, "Something's on your mind."

"We may have to call this place home for quite awhile," Corson said. "We're off the shipping and air lanes."

"The Coast Guard will search."

"Maybe. But where do they start? Where do they look? Ten Thousand Islands may be a part of the United States, but even that area has never been explored. From this point, civilization might as well be a million miles away."

I was sweating heavily; from the dense heat, and from his words.

"Somebody will find us," I said doggedly.

"Or what's left of the *Peri*," Corson said. A wolfish grin came to his face. "At least we won't starve—as long as you and the woman follow my orders."

"You fancy yourself king of this island, Corson?"

"Damn right I do. I've lived in swamp country. I know how to live off the land. Without me, you and her wouldn't last a week."

I sensed the unleashed arrogance in Corson. I thought that if anything happened to me she'd be here alone with him.

It seemed we had to accept a king, for a little time, anyway.

Corson hadn't been boasting when he said he knew how to live off the land.

Our first problem was water. In a small, sandy clearing near the center

of the island, Corson and I dug with sticks. We scooped out a shallow pan, four feet across, nearly three feet deep. There was dampness, and from the dampness came the seepage of water.

"It'll be brackish," Corson said, wiping sweat from his face with his forearm. "It'll have the taste of the sea, but it'll sustain life."

The next three days ran together in an endless moment of heat, toil, hunger, with only the meaty buds of the wild cabbage palm to stave off starvation.

Corson spared himself no more than he spared Peri and me. Under his direction we gathered the wild thistle that Seminole tribes once used to mix with water and make a form of bread. We dug coontie root, scrounged bird and turtle eggs. We explored every inch of the island, until we knew where snakes might be had for emergency rations.

Wildlife was plentiful, hares, field mice, swarms of birds. We set snares and deadfalls. We fashioned crude, basket-like crab traps from strips of palm frond, baiting them with putrid meat after our traps began operating. We had vines and plaited palm fibers for cordage, and when we hauled in the first of the crabs, I looked at the size and numbers of them, and I shuddered, thinking of Marty.

There were wild bananas on the island. As for vegetables, Corson assured us that a human being could eat practically anything growing out of the earth so long as it did not run milky sap when broken.

We gathered the largest shells on the beach for cooking and eating utensils.

One of Corson's very first achievements was fire. He took the crystal from Peri's useless diamond-studded wristwatch. It was convex, to magnify the delicate numbers on the watch face. Corson piled a bit of tender dried grass near the edge of the jungle. He crushed more of the grass to make a volatile powder and added it to the pile. Then for a solid hour he crouched in the merciless heat, concentrating the power of the sun through the tiny watch crystal. Finally, the grass began to smoke around the pin-point of sun fire that Corson held so steadily on a single spot. We lighted sticks and carried our fire to our campsite beside the spring Corson and I had made.

And then it seemed that quite suddenly our time of exhaustion, of drugged sleep alternating with periods of violent activity, was over.

We possessed thatched huts. We ate well, even salting our food with

the residue left after evaporating sea water in shallow shells. We refreshed our pile of greasy, green vegetation near the campfire. This would be thrown on the fire to send up a column of smoke, a signal, if the empty sky or brassy hot horizon ever showed a sign of life.

Until we were a going concern, there was little chance to think or feel the things that plague civilized people. Peri had to work shoulder to shoulder with us, until we were all ready to drop in our tracks. During those first days, our individuality and the things that had made us what we were aboard the *Peri* were pushed into the background.

Then we had a little leisure again—and I saw the grossness of Corson, because Peri was once more a woman, a very special woman, the only one of her kind in all the earth.

Corson knew what I was feeling, and his thoughts were as plain to me as if he had spoken them aloud. Outwardly, neither made a move, not yet, but the men inside the cloaks of sun-blackened skin crouched and watched with mounting wariness and hatred.

Peri seemed to sense nothing of it at first. She had worked like a robot, as tireless as Corson or me. Now she walked the beach just as tirelessly, trying to find something to interest her, but never able for long to keep her gaze from seaward, from the place far out where Marty had died.

She still pulled her own share of the load. She still said little, living in those days before crashing waves had washed across the *Peri*.

I loved her with a tenderness I didn't know was in me. At night, when she sat silent, bathed in the flickering light of the campfire, so beautiful she was a creature beyond belief, I wanted to tell her. I wanted to help her accept the fact that Marty was gone, forever. I wanted to say things I'd never said to another woman.

I said nothing.

Because there was Corson. Corson would never believe the way I felt. He'd never understand. I couldn't explain to him, and so long as Corson was in the way, I could say nothing to her.

I began sleeping badly. Even in sleep, I was aware of her near me at one hand, Ralph Corson at the other.

Then one night he went to her.

It was a night brilliant with moonlight, the skies blue and clear, a faint breeze curling off the Gulf over the island.

I woke and lay perfectly still, seeing the bulk of him standing near her

shelter. He was crouching a little, looking in at her as she lay spangled with moonlight.

I heard a shuddering breath come out of him. I saw his hand pass over his face. I witnessed the final struggle of the man with himself.

There was cunning on his face as he looked toward the thatched lean-to where I slept. And I knew then that he had made his decision, finally. He had decided that the three of us could live no longer on this island. It might come to me tomorrow, or next week. He might use a club, or report to her that I'd drowned accidentally.

Or he might not wait at all.

He was looking around. Cat-like, he moved toward the fire. From the old edges of the fire he picked up a stick. It was thicker than my wrist. Its end had been burned to a fire-hardened point.

With a sound that I didn't recognize as coming from my own throat, I threw myself out of the lean-to as he came toward me with the spear upraised.

He cursed, changed his mind, swung the stick as a club.

I stumbled and fell. I rolled away. He was in a momentary fury, beyond all reason, goaded with the knowledge that he had actually put dark thought to action and could not turn back now.

I grabbed a club, larger than Corson's, from the wood pile. I met him snarling. The clubs crashed together. We both fell back, circled. Panting, sweat rolling down our faces and naked chests, we went at each other savagely.

This was the picture of us that Peri received. She had wakened, and she stood looking at us.

As I fell back from Corson's heavy blows, I glimpsed her face.

For a brief instant I could visualize what she was seeing. I saw the change hit her face as a horrible understanding came to her.

Corson's swing brought his club against mine. The weapon almost left my hands. I continued to fall back. She was out of range of my vision now. All I could see was Corson's face, the exultation in it as he sensed triumph.

He was less cautious, and I was filled with a sudden cunning. He was stronger, but I was faster. I invited a blow by appearing to be off balance. When he swung, I slipped to one side, and I had him.

I laid the stick along the side of his head. He fell, legs twisting.

He went scrabbling away like a killer crab. He seized his club, tried

to rise, and I knocked the weapon out of his hands.

He fell back and lay gasping, looking up at me.

"Corson," I said, "you're not king any longer."

"You're the boss, Danton. All the way the boss," he panted. "Danton! She's gone!"

I thought at first it was a trick. I stepped back, still watching him. Then I glanced over my shoulder.

He hadn't been lying.

"Peril!"

There was no answer from her. I forgot Corson for the moment.

I couldn't see her around the edges of the clearing. I moved down the pathway we'd worn toward the beach.

I didn't see her there, either.

Not at first.

I was in water to my waist when Corson grabbed me from behind.

"You fool," he said, "you'd never catch her."

Together we stumbled backward to the beach. I hated him as I'd never hated before, and I knew the feeling was mutual. I knew too that we'd live in uneasy truce until the day in the indeterminate future when someone else fished these waters and saw our smoke column and came to investigate. There was no reason now for blood letting and neither Corson nor I wanted to face the future alone on the island.

We stood and watched, and as the golden head crested the low, murmuring waves, we called to her.

I shouted, the sound an agony in the bright night, until I had no voice left.

She was out of sight then; and she would keep going. Until she reached that spot far, far out where the part of her known as Marty Janus had gone down.

Finally, Corson and I stood under the vast sky in silence, not looking at each other, thinking of the way we had killed her, and of the weapon we'd used . . .

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How did the murderer—and the victim—get into the locked warehouse . . . ?

WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, SAM SPADE?

by **BILL PRONZINI**



The Brinkman Company, Specialty Imports, was located just off the Embarcadero, across from Pier 26 in the shadow of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. It was a smallish rectangular building, made out of wood with a brick façade; it didn't look like much from the outside, or from the inside either. But according to Arthur Brinkman it currently housed something more than a quarter of a million dollars in wholesale merchandise. Which was where I came in: Brinkman had hired me to

make sure nobody came skulking around after dark to steal or vandalize any of it.

In other words I was a glorified night watchman.

Not that I minded; nobody had wanted me to do any detecting or skulking of my own in recent weeks, and Brinkman had guaranteed my wages for a full seven days. That was how long he expected to keep the bulk of his merchandise, most of which had arrived by freighter from Europe in a single load, before it could be inventoried and trucked out to customers. It was the largest single transaction he'd ever been involved in, he said, and he was nervous about having \$250,000 worth of goods tucked away in a waterfront warehouse.

I could understand how he felt, but I doubted he had cause for worry. In the first place, his merchandise may have been valuable but it was not the kind that would tempt thieves, professional or otherwise. What it was, for the most part, was Hummel figurines from Germany, Murano glass from Italy, special flamenco dolls from Spain, crystal from Sweden, pewter from Norway, Delft porcelain miniatures from Holland, intricate dollhouse accessories from France. There are people around who will steal anything, of course, but not very many who were likely to get hot and bothered over Hummel figurines or Delft miniatures. And where would you fence stolen flamenco dolls or French dollhouse accessories?

In the second place, that building was a mini-fortress. The former owners had been an import-export outfit that dealt in high-priced artwork, and they had installed a number of safeguards: steel shutters that covered the windows and doors from the outside, sets of gatelike bars that you could padlock across the doors and windows from the inside. And the walls and roof were reinforced with steel rods. About the only way anybody was going to break in there at night was with blasting caps or chain saws.

I had mentioned all of this to Brinkman, just for the record, when he first showed me around the place, but he was determined to have a man on the premises as an added precaution. So I accepted his check and became his night watchman. And, as expected, the only watching I had done for three nights was of the clock in Brinkman's private office, where I settled myself with a pulp magazine when I wasn't wandering around the warehouse area. Time doesn't exactly race by when you're alone in a sealed building with nothing to do except read and wander around and listen to the foghorns moaning out on the Bay.

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So I was not much looking forward to tonight, my fourth in a row at The Brinkman Company, as I turned into the small lot that fronted the building. It was five minutes of six and just starting to get dark; the air was misty and cold and whipped up by a stiff wind that had the sharp smell of salt in it. Bitter night coming up—typical early-March weather in San Francisco. And the warehouse was unheated and Brinkman's office tended to be chilly even with its wall heater turned on. Ah, the exciting life of a private eye. Danger, intrigue, adventure, beautiful women, feats of derring-do.

Thirteen hours of boredom and a half-frozen rear end.

Where have you gone, Sam Spade? I thought.

I put my car next to Brinkman's new station wagon, gave myself a mocking grin in the rearview mirror, and went across to the door carrying a paper sack full of my next two meals and a half-dozen pulps. The door was locked, as it always was; I banged on the glass until Brinkman himself came out and opened up for me.

He was a wiry little man in his mid-forties, with colorless hair and features so bland they had the odd reverse effect of making you remember him; he looked as if a good wind would blow him apart and away, like the fluff of a dandelion. But he had quick, canny eyes and his hands were never still, as if he were creating invisible things with them out of the air.

"Hello," he said. "Good thing you're on time. I have an engagement at seven-thirty and I've got to-rush."

"You want me to lock up, Mr. Brinkman?"

"No, I've already done that. But you'd better double-check me, make certain everything is secure."

"Right."

One of the three doors behind the receptionist's desk opened just then and Orin McIntyre, the bookkeeper, came out carrying a briefcase in each hand. He was a heavy-set guy around my age, early fifties, with a drinker's nose and the thick gnarled hands of a longshoreman. He could have gone on the old *What's My Line?* television show and nobody would have guessed his occupation. So much for stereotypes.

I said, "How're you tonight, Mr. McIntyre?"

"Lousy," he said.

"Something wrong?"

"The hell with it." He looked past me at Brinkman—a look that almost

crackled with animosity. "And the hell with *you*," he said, and went to the door and slammed out into the windy dusk.

Through the glass I watched him walk across toward the street entrance to the lot. When I turned back Brinkman said, "He's pretty upset with me. I suppose I can't blame him."

"Why is that?"

Brinkman shrugged. "I had to let him go. His work wasn't all it should be and I've been thinking about promoting Miss Robbins anyway, turning the bookkeeping over to her and hiring a new receptionist."

Uh-huh, I thought. Fran Robbins was the current receptionist, a moderately attractive, buxom, and unmarried redhead two-thirds Brinkman's age. It had been obvious during my first visit that the two of them had something going; my old private eyes were still good at detecting things like that, if not much else.

But then, Brinkman's personal life was really none of my concern. Nor, for that matter, were his business decisions except as they pertained to me. So I just nodded, let a couple of seconds pass, and then asked him, "Everyone else gone, Mr. Brinkman?" Meaning Miss Robbins and the big, tough-looking, and not-very-bright guy named Judkins who worked as warehouseman.

"Yes," Brinkman answered. He shot the cuff of his grey pinstripe jacket and looked at his watch. "And I've got to be gone too or I'll be late for my engagement. I'll call you later, as usual. Around midnight."

"Fine." He was a worrier, all right; that was why he called every night to check in before he went to bed. And there's never anything you can say to reassure a worrier. The more you tell them everything is going to be O.K., the more fretful they get.

I followed him to the door and we exchanged good nights. When he had gone out I pulled the outside shutter down and snapped its catch into the locking plate buried in the concrete; the only time this shutter could be locked was when somebody like me was inside for the night, because otherwise—with the rear doors and all the windows sealed from within—there was no way anybody would be able to get in from outside. Then I closed and locked the door, using the latchkey Brinkman had given me. And made it a triple seal by swinging the barred gate shut across the door and padlocking it. And there I was, sealed in all nice and cozy until seven A.M. tomorrow.

The next order of business was to shut off the ceiling lights, which I
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did and which left the reception area dark except for the desk lamp glowing beyond the half-open door to Brinkman's office. I went in there and put my paper sack down on the desk, came out again, and crossed to the middle of the three doors, the one leading back into the warehouse.

There was a short corridor beyond that opened into a section partitioned off with wallboard: bathroom on the right, L-shaped shipping counter on the left. A dull yellowish bulb burned above the counter and cast just enough light to bleach the shadows past the partitions. None of the overheads were on in the warehouse proper; it was like a wall of velvet back there with all the windows shuttered against the dying daylight. I located the bank of electrical switches and flipped each in turn. The rafter bulbs were not much brighter than the one over the counter, but the string of them herded most of the shadows into corners or behind stacks of wooden crates and shelving.

The warehouse was a wide spacious area with rafters crisscrossing under a high roof, a concrete floor, and white-painted walls. A cleared aisleway ran straight down its geometrical center to the rear doors. Built into the joining of the right-side and rear walls, ten feet above the floor, was a thirty-foot-square loft; a set of stairs led up to it and its jumble of boxes and storage items.

To the right of the aisle, down to the loft stairs, were perpendicular rows of platform shelving, with narrow little aisles between them; most of the shelves were filled with merchandise both packed and unpacked, the unpacked boxes showing gouts of either straw packing or excelsior. To the left of the aisle was open floor space jammed with stacked crates, pallets, dollies, bins full of more straw packing, and carts with metal wheels—all arranged in such a mazelike way that you could, if you were careful, move among them without knocking or falling over something.

The nearest of the windows was in the left-side wall, visible from where I stood; I moved toward it down the main aisle. The place had a musty warehouse smell, faintly brackish from the crates and their transatlantic voyage in the hold of a freighter. Otherwise there was nothing to smell, see, or hear. As there had been nothing to smell, see, or hear on any of the three previous nights.

I made my way through the clutter to the near window. The barred gate was closed and firmly padlocked through an iron hasp, and through the windowpane I could see that the shutter was in place. There was a second window several feet beyond, to the rear; I had a look at that one

next. Secure. Then I moved over to the shelving, down one of the cross-aisles past several hundred unpacked crystal candleholders that caught and reflected the light like so many prisms. And the single window on that side, too, was shuttered and barred up tight.

That left the rear doors. I went down there and rattled the gate and the padlock, as I had done at the windows, and peered through the bars at the double locks on the doors themselves. Secure. This building really was a mini-fortress; I thought that a team of commandos would be hard pressed to breach it.

As I had on the other nights, to pass time, I prowled around for fifteen minutes, shining my flashlight into dark corners, examining whimsical Hummel figurines and brightly colored Murano glass vases, poking through what few purchase orders there were on the shipping counter. Lethargy was already starting to set in; I caught myself yawning twice. But it was as much a lack of sleep as it was boredom. I had never been able to sleep much in the daytime and I had not averaged more than five hours since beginning my stint as night watchman. It would have been nice to curl up in a nest of straw and take a nap, but my conscience said no. I had never cheated a client in any fashion and I was not about to start now by sleeping on the job.

So I shut off the overheads and went back to Brinkman's office, leaving the warehouse door open by force of habit. It was almost as cold in there as it was in the warehouse, which was probably just as well: the chill would help keep me awake. I got my thermos bottle out of the paper sack and poured a cup of hot coffee. And sat back with it and one of the pulps I'd brought, bundled up in my coat, feet propped on a low metal file cabinet to one side of the desk.

The minute hand dragged itself around the clock on the wall. In the pulp—the December 1936 issue of *Detective Tales*—I read "Satan Covers the Waterfront" by Tom Roan and "The Case of the Whispering Terror" by George Bruce. Outside, the velocity of the wind increased; I could hear it rattling a loose drain gutter on the roof as I read "Malachi Gunn and the Vanishing Heiress" by Franklin H. Martin.

8:40.

I poured another cup of coffee. None of the other stories in the issue of *Detective Tales* looked interesting; I put it down and picked up the May 1953 *Dime Mystery*. And read "House of the Restless Dead" by Hugh B. Cave and "Mistress of Terror" by Wyatt Blassingame. The wind

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slackened again and the only background noises I had to listen to then were creaking joints and the distant moan of foghorns on the Bay.

10:05.

I read "The Man Who Was Dead" by John Dixon Carr, which was a nice little ghost story set in England. The "Dixon" was no doubt a misspelling and the author was John Dickson Carr, the master of the locked-room mystery; Carr had published a few stories in mid-1930s pulps, I knew, one other of which I had read in the third or fourth issue of *Detective Tales*.

My eyes were beginning to feel heavy-lidded and gritty; I rubbed at them with my knuckles, closed the magazine, yawned noisily, and looked at the thermos and the three salami-and-cheese sandwiches inside the sack. But I wasn't hungry just yet and the coffee had to last me the rest of the night. I got to my feet, stretching, and glanced at the clock again in spite of myself.

10:33.

And something made a noise out in the warehouse—a dull thud like a heavy weight falling against another object.

The hair bristled up on my neck; I stood frozen, listening, for three or four seconds. The silence seemed suddenly eerie. Sounds in the night seldom bother me, but this was different. This was a building in which I was alone and sealed up, and yet I was sure the thudding noise had come from *inside* the warehouse.

I grabbed my flashlight off the desk, switched it on, and ran into the reception area on the balls of my feet. Just as I reached the open warehouse door, I had an almost subliminal glimpse of a streak of light winking out beyond the night-lit shipping counter. Somebody else with a flash? I threw my own beam down the corridor, went through the doorway after it.

In the clotted darkness ahead there was a faint thumping sound.

Without slowing I veered past the shipping counter and over to the bank of light switches. The flash beam illuminated the near third of the main aisleway, but its diffused glare showed me nothing except inanimate objects.

Another thump. And then a kind of sharp clicking or popping. Both noises seemed to come from somewhere diagonally to my left.

I threw the switches all at once, slapping upward with the palm of my free hand. When I hurried ahead into the aisle, the pale rafter lights let

me see the same tableau as earlier—nothing altered, nothing subtracted, nothing added.

Except for one thing.

There was a dead man lying a few feet to the left of the aisle, half draped across one of the wooden crates.

I saw him when I was no more than twenty feet into the warehouse and I knew right away he was dead. He was facing toward me, twisted onto his side, features half hidden behind an upflung arm; there was blood all over the leather jacket and blue turtleneck sweater he wore and the one eye I could see was wide open. Hesitantly, gawping a little, I moved to where he was and bent over him.

Judkins, Sam Judkins—the warehouseman.

He'd been shot once in the left side, under the breastbone, at point-blank range with a small-caliber gun: scorch and powder marks were visible around the hole and there was no exit wound.

Jacket and trousers wet in front and smelling of . . . wood alcohol?

Ripples of cold flowed over my back. The eerie silence, the dead man, the bullet wound, the wood alcohol all combined to give me a feeling of surreality, as though I were asleep and dreaming all of this. I backed away from the body, shaking my head. He couldn't have got in here but here he was. He couldn't have been murdered in here but here he was. It was murder, all right; no gun near him, whoever shot him still had it. And what happened to *him*? Where did *he* go?

Still in here somewhere, hiding?

I stopped moving and made myself stand still for thirty seconds. No activity anywhere. No sounds anywhere. Over to my left, lying on a metal-wheeled cart, was one of those curved iron bars used for prying lids off wooden crates; I caught it up and held it cocked against my shoulder as I paced back into the aisle, along it through the shipping area.

But nothing happened.

Nor was there anything more to hear.

In Brinkman's office I dialed the police emergency number. Eberhardt, my sober-sided cop friend, was on night duty in the Homicide Detail this week and I got through to him immediately. Lucky me. He grumbled and did some swearing, told me to stay where I was and not to do anything stupid, and hung up while I was reminding him I used to be a police officer myself.

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I went back into the reception area and took another look through the door leading to the warehouse. But if whoever had killed Judkins was still here, why hadn't he come after me by now? It didn't make sense that he would let me call the cops and then hang around to wait for them.

The front door seemed to be as secure as before; that was the first thing I checked. Nobody could possibly have come in through there when I was in Brinkman's office earlier, or gone out through there after I heard those noises. I walked back into the warehouse again, taking the pry bar with me just in case. Not touching anything, I checked the gates and padlocks on all the windows and the rear doors. And each of them was also as secure as before.

So how had Judkins and whoever killed him got in?

And how had the killer got out?

When the banging started at the front entrance I was back in Brinkman's office, just hanging up the telephone for the third time. I hurried out and unlocked the gate and swung it aside; unlocked the door and opened it; released the catch on the outside shutter and slid it up.

"What the hell are you guarding in there?" Eberhardt said sourly. "Gold bullion?"

There were a half-dozen other cops with him: an inspector named Klein, two guys from the police lab outfitted with a field kit and photographic equipment, and three uniformed patrolmen. I moved aside without saying anything and let all of them crowd past me into the reception area. Then I shut the door again to cut off the icy blasts of wind.

Eberhardt made a gnawing sound on the stem of his pipe and glowered at me. The glower didn't mean anything; like the pipe—one of twenty or thirty battered old briars he owned—it was a permanent fixture, part of his professional persona. Underneath the gruff exterior he had pussycat tendencies, but he never admitted to the fact; he probably thought it clashed with his earnest dedication to upholding law and order. The only times he smiled or relaxed were when he was off duty.

He asked me, "Where's the victim?"

"Warehouse area, in back."

I led him and the others out there. The two lab guys headed straight for the body; Eberhardt told Klein and two of the patrolmen—the third had stayed in the reception area—to have a look around; and then made it a threesome around the dead man. The alcohol smell coming off Judkins'

clothes was strong on the cold air; I retreated from it, across the center aisle, and stood waiting against one of the platform shelves.

Nine or ten minutes passed. I watched Klein and one of the patrolmen poke around, peering at the windows and doors, checking for possible hiding places. The other patrolman climbed up into the loft and shined his flashlight among the boxes and things. One of the lab guys began taking photographs of the body.

Klein came back from the rear doors just as an assistant coroner hustled in from the opposite direction; the two of them joined Eberhardt for a brief consultation, after which Klein disappeared up front, the coroner's man moved to the corpse, and Eb came over to where I was.

"You got anything to add to what you told me on the phone?"

"Not much," I said. "There's nothing missing from among the merchandise in here, at least as far as I can tell, and the place is still sealed up tight. I tried calling Brinkman after I talked to you but there was no answer."

"Any idea where he might be?"

"He said he had an engagement at seven-thirty. I figured it might be with the receptionist, Fran Robbins, because it looks like they've got a relationship going. But there's nobody home at her place either."

"Dead man worked here too, that right?"

I nodded. "He was the warehouseman."

"Was he around when you got here tonight?"

"No."

"How many other employees?"

"Just one. Bookkeeper named Orin McIntyre. But he's an ex-employee as of today."

Eberhardt cocked an eyebrow. "Quit or fired?"

"Fired," I said. "Brinkman told me his work had been going downhill lately and he was forced to let him go. McIntyre left just after I got here; he didn't look any too happy."

"You think there might be a connection between that and the murder?"

"I don't know. I tried McIntyre's number too just before you came. Third straight no answer."

"Mm. All right—let's go over your story again, in detail this time. Don't leave anything out."

I gave him a complete rundown of the night's events as I knew them. And the more I talked, the more he glowered. What we had here was

a mystery and mysteries annoy hell out of him.

Klein returned just as I finished. He said to Eberhardt, "I looked around outside. Nothing I could find in the parking lot or anywhere else in the vicinity."

"You check the doors and windows?"

"Yep. All secured with inside-locking shutters."

"You're certain they're secure?"

"Positive."

"Same thing in here too, huh? With the gates?"

"I'm afraid so, Eb."

Eberhardt said something under his breath—and up front, in the reception area, the telephone began to ring. I glanced at my watch. Almost midnight.

"That'll be Brinkman," I said. "He calls every night about this time to check in."

"You get it," Eberhardt said to Klein. "Wherever he is, tell him to come here right away."

"Right."

When Klein had gone again Eb said to me, "What is it with you lately, hotshot? Every time I turn around you're mixed up in some kind of screwy case. Locked rooms, impossible crime situations—all sorts of weird stuff."

I said wryly, "Where have you gone, Sam Spade?"

"How's that?"

"Just something I was thinking earlier tonight."

"Yeah, well, from now on take on simple cases, will you? Do skip traces or find somebody's missing cousin like a normal private eye."

"You want me to get hit on the head too?"

"Why not? It wouldn't hurt you much."

The assistant coroner called to him before I could say anything else and he went over for another short conference. Just after they broke it up, Klein reappeared from the reception area. He and Eberhardt converged on me again.

Eb said, "Was that Brinkman?"

"Uh-huh. He'll be right down."

"Where was he calling from?"

"The apartment of one of his employees," Klein said, "a woman named Fran Robbins. He says he's just promoted her to bookkeeper and they've

been celebrating all evening—at her place for dinner, then out for a drive around ten. They just got back. He sounded pretty upset when I told him what'd happened here."

"Wouldn't you be?" Eberhardt got a leather pouch out of his coat pocket and began thumbing shag-cut tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, scowling all the while.

Klein asked him, "Coroner's man have anything to say yet?"

"Confirmed the obvious, that's all. Shot once at close range, death instantaneous or close to it. Small-caliber weapon, looks like; we'll know what when the M.E. digs out the bullet."

I said speculatively, "Maybe a .22 with a silencer."

"Why a silencer?"

"Because I didn't hear the shot."

"The gun could have been muffled with something else. Heavy cloth, cushion of some kind—anything along those lines."

"True enough. But it was pitch dark in here except for the killer's flashlight; it'd be kind of awkward to hold a flash on somebody and muffle and fire a gun all at the same time."

"Well, a silencer seems just as doubtful," Eberhardt said. "They don't leave powder and scorch marks like the ones on Judkins."

"Then why didn't I hear the shot?"

None of us had a ready answer for that. Klein asked, "What about the alcohol smell?"

"Wood alcohol, evidently," Eberhardt told him. "Judkins had a bottle of it zipped inside his jacket pocket; the bullet shattered the bottle on its way into him."

"Was he drinking it, you suppose?"

"He was crazy if he was; that stuff will destroy your insides. No way to be sure yet though. There's a strong alcohol odor around the mouth, but it could be gin."

I said, "Was there anything else on the body?"

"Usual stuff people carry in their pockets, that's all."

"How much money in his wallet?"

"Fifty-eight dollars. You thinking robbery?"

"It's a possibility."

"Sure, but not of Judkins so much as by him and somebody else. Of what's in this warehouse, I mean. That would explain what he and whoever killed him were doing here tonight."

"It would," I said, "except that it doesn't add up. Nothing seems to be missing; so if two guys come to a place to rob it, why would one of them shoot the other *before* the robbery?"

"And how did they get in and out in the first place?" Klein added.

Eberhardt jabbed his pipe in my direction. "Listen, are you sure you were alone when you locked up after Brinkman?"

"Pretty sure," I said. "I came out here first thing and checked the windows and doors. Then I wandered around for a while, looking things over. I didn't see or hear a thing."

"But somebody—Judkins, say—*could* have been hiding in here just the same."

"It's remotely possible, I guess. Up on the loft, maybe; I didn't go up there. But Brinkman told me Judkins had gone for the day, and it just isn't reasonable that he could have slipped back in without anybody seeing him. And I still think I would have felt something. You know when you're alone and when you're not alone, at least most of the time; you get vibes."

Klein said, "Even if Judkins was hiding in here, what was the point in it? To steal something? Hell, he worked here; he could have committed theft during business hours. And it doesn't explain how the killer got in and out either."

"There is one explanation that'll cover all of that," I said. "But I don't like it much; it's too farfetched."

"Go ahead."

"Nobody got in and out of here because there's no killer. Judkins committed suicide."

"You're right," Eberhardt said sourly, "it's too farfetched. If he shot himself, where the hell is the gun?"

"He could have dropped it somewhere and staggered down here and fallen where he is now. A thorough search would turn it up."

"Why would he pick a place like this to kill himself in?"

"Suppose he hated Brinkman for some reason and figured the publicity would damage the business. Suppose he wanted familiar surroundings when he pulled the trigger. . . ." I spread my hands because Eberhardt was shaking his head in a disgusted way. "Well, I told you it was improbable, Eb."

"The other possibilities are just as improbable," Klein said. "One person, or even two, could have been hiding in here tonight without you realizing it; but there's nobody hiding in here now. Which means Judkins'

killer had to get out, if not in—and how could he do that when all the doors and windows are triple-sealed?”

“Maybe he’s a magician or a ghost,” Eberhardt said with heavy sarcasm. “Maybe he walked through the damned wall.”

The two patrolmen who had been searching the warehouse came up and reported that they hadn’t found anything of significance, unless you wanted to count an empty gin bottle tucked under some rags on the loft. Then a couple of interns entered with a stretcher, and Eberhardt and Klein went to talk to the assistant coroner again before he gave the interns permission to remove the body.

It was 12:35 and I was drinking a cup of my thermos coffee in the reception area when Brinkman showed up. He came sailing in with Fran Robbins on one arm, looking more agitated than ever; his hands fluttered here and there, creating more of those invisible things out of the air. Miss Robbins looked bewildered, nervous, and a little frightened. She kept brushing a lock of dark-red hair out of one eye and casting glances around the room as though she’d never seen it before.

Brinkman veered over to where I was. He gave me an accusing glare, as if he thought I had betrayed him somehow, and breathed stale tobacco and wafted the heavy sweetness of too much cologne in my direction. “What’s been going on here tonight?” he said. “The policeman on the phone told me Sam Judkins is dead. Murdered.”

“I’m afraid so, Mr. Brinkman.”

“But how? By whom?”

“He was shot,” I said. “The police don’t know who did it yet. They think maybe you can help them.”

“How can I help them? I don’t even know what’s going on.” He fumbled a package of cigarettes from the pocket of his brown suit coat, got one into his mouth, and fired it with a gold lighter. I watched him do that without a trace of envy. It had been almost two years since I had quit smoking, because of a lesion on one lung, and I seldom even thought of cigarettes any more. “Is anything missing, stolen? Could it have been robbery?”

“Nothing stolen as far as I could tell,” I said. “You’ll be able to judge that a lot better yourself after you’ve talked to Lieutenant Eberhardt.”

“Is he the man in charge?”

“Yes. He’s out in the warehouse.”

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Brinkman nodded, turned away, and headed through the middle doorway. Miss Robbins hesitated, glancing at me and biting her lip, before finally going after him. The patrolman by the door looked after her with the intensity and admiration of a connoisseur.

I finished my coffee and poured another cup. It was quiet in the room now—but not at all quiet inside my head. Things were beginning to go clickety-click in there, like a sturdy old engine warming up and about to run smooth.

I closed my eyes, concentrating. Vague ideas sharpened and took on weight and shape; bits and pieces of information slotted themselves neatly into place. And in less than ten minutes—

“Sure,” I said aloud. “Hell, yes.”

The patrolman cocked his head at me and said something I didn’t listen to; I was already on my feet and moving toward the middle doorway. I hustled down the corridor and into the warehouse. Ahead, near where the body had lain, Eberhardt and Klein were talking to Brinkman and Miss Robbins.

Brinkman was saying as I came up to them, “It could be, you know, that Orin McIntyre killed him somehow.”

“Why do you say that?” Eberhardt asked.

“Well, it was just a thought. I had to fire McIntyre today because of poor work, and he didn’t take it very well; also, he never did get along with Judkins—”

“Maybe not,” I said, “but he didn’t kill him.”

Brinkman’s eyes flicked toward me. “How do you know he didn’t?”

“Because *you* killed Judkins,” I said.

Miss Robbins made a little gasping sound; Eberhardt and Klein both stiffened. Surprise opened up Brinkman’s face for an instant: guilt flickered there like a film clip on a screen. Then it was gone and his stare was full of shocked indignation.

“You’re crazy,” he said. He turned and appealed to Eberhardt. “He’s crazy.”

Eb said, “Maybe,” and narrowed his eyes at me. “Well?”

“He did it, all right.”

“You got proof to back that up?”

“Enough,” I said, which was not quite the truth. All I had were some solid deductions based on circumstantial evidence and plain logic. But I knew I was right. There was only one person who could have killed

Judkins and only one way the whole thing made sense; eliminate the impossible, as Sherlock Holmes once said to Watson, and whatever's left, no matter how improbable, must be the answer. So I was pretty sure I could prove, at least to Eberhardt's satisfaction, that Brinkman *had* to be the murderer. After that it would be up to Eberhardt to make a homicide charge stick.

Brinkman drew himself up, all bluff and bluster, and made angry waving gestures. "This accusation is ridiculous," he said to Eberhardt. "I had nothing to do with what happened here tonight. I spent the entire evening with Fran; I've already told you that."

"So you have. Is that your story too, Miss?"

She looked at Brinkman, wet her lips, and said, "Yes," in a small anxious voice.

I said, "You're sure about that, Miss Robbins? Being an accessory to insurance fraud is a minor offense; being an accessory to murder gets you a lot of years in prison."

That sharpened the anxiety and confusion in her eyes. She put a hand on Brinkman's arm. "Artie?"

"It's all right, Fran. He doesn't know what the hell he's talking about."

Eberhardt said, "What's this about insurance fraud?"

"That was the idea from the beginning," I told him. "Maybe this outfit isn't as profitable as Brinkman wants people to think; maybe he's been operating in the red and doesn't have enough capital to pay off on the merchandise that just came in from Europe, or enough buyers to take it all off his hands. Judging from the small number of purchase orders on the shipping counter, I'd say that's the case. So the same bright idea occurred to him that's occurred to too many businessmen these days: burn the place down and collect the insurance."

I was watching Brinkman as I talked. Still all bluff and bluster, his restless hands plucking away at the air; the shrewd eyes weren't admitting anything.

"Only he was smart enough to realize that arson would be suggested and there'd be a thorough investigation," I said. "And so he decided to set up a neat bit of camouflage. Hire a private eye with a good reputation to act as night watchman, set himself up with an alibi, and then have a fire started right under my nose. I wasn't supposed to get hurt, of course; I was supposed to testify later that I was alone in a completely impenetrable building when the fire broke out. Nobody could have set the fire

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except me and I'd be exonerated because of my reputation. Therefore the cause of it would have to be spontaneous combustion or something, which wouldn't be hard to believe with all the straw packing lying around here. Therefore the insurance company would have no recourse except to pay off on the claim."

"You're making sense so far," Eberhardt said. "Now where does Judkins come into it? The hired torch, maybe?"

I nodded. "He had to be. It explains the wood alcohol he had in his pocket, for one thing. That stuff is inflammable as hell; you can use it to start a dandy fire."

"But then why would Brinkman kill him before he could start it?"

"It wasn't a premeditated killing; murder was never part of the original plan. Judkins died because of something that happened between him and Brinkman tonight, something that made Brinkman come down here around ten o'clock—"

"I don't have to listen to any more of this," Brinkman said. His expression still showed defiance, but a muscle had begun to jump under his left eye so that he seemed to be winking spasmodically. "I wasn't anywhere near here at ten o'clock, I tell you. I was with Fran—"

I said, "You went straight to her apartment when you left here at six?"

"That's right."

"And had dinner and then went out for a drive together afterward."

"Yes."

"Then why did you change your suit?"

"What?"

"You were wearing a grey pinstripe suit when you left here; now you're wearing a brown suit. Why change clothes? And when and where? Unless maybe you got the grey suit wet and bloody when you shot Judkins, and went home to change before going *back* to Miss Robbins' apartment. And why splash yourself with so much cologne? You weren't wearing any earlier tonight. Unless it was to cover up the smell of wood alcohol; it was all over Judkins' body and if it got all over you too, you wouldn't be able to get rid of the odor just by taking a shower."

The muscle kept on jumping under Brinkman's eye. He looked over at the woman; she had long since let go of his arm and backed off a couple of steps. She would not look at him now; there was a dark flush on both cheeks. She was just starting to admit to herself that he really was a murderer, and once she accepted the truth she would turn on him. And

that would be all Eberhardt needed.

"Keep talking," Eb said to me. "Something happened between Brinkman and Judkins tonight?"

"Right. An argument of some kind, probably over how much Judkins was to be paid. Maybe he tried to shake Brinkman down for a bigger payoff before he did the job. In any case they met here, and one of them brought a gun, and Judkins ended up getting shot dead."

"Are you saying the shooting took place *outside*?"

"Yes. That's why I didn't hear the shot: the wind muffled it."

"Then why put the body in here?"

"Because it probably seemed like the best alternative at the time. If Brinkman left it outside for somebody to find, the arson scheme would be spoiled and the police investigation just might implicate him. And taking the body away somewhere was too risky. Both he and Judkins had to have come here on foot; he couldn't carry the dead man all the way to wherever he'd left his car, and he couldn't bring the car onto the grounds for fear of alerting me.

"But if he transported the body inside and started the fire himself, there was a chance the corpse would be burned badly enough to conceal the fact that Judkins had died from a gunshot wound. Which probably wouldn't have happened, forensic medicine being what it is today; but he had to be rattled and desperate and it looked to him like his only way out. And afterward he could claim that Judkins had set the fire on his own, for his own reasons, and been caught in it and died as a result. The insurance company, at least in theory, would still have to pay off.

"Only that plan backfired too. He's a small guy and Judkins was a big guy; he got the body in here all right but he lost control of it as he was setting it down. It landed on top of a crate and made that loud thudding noise I heard. Brinkman knew I'd come to investigate and he was afraid I'd see him and recognize him; he panicked, shut off the flashlight he'd been using, and got out."

Brinkman was standing ramrod stiff, both hands bunched together at his waist. The only change in the way he looked was in the color of his face: it had gone paper-white.

"Now we come to the sixty-four-dollar question," Eberhardt said. "This place was sealed inside and out, like a damned tomb; it still is. How was Judkins supposed to get inside in the first place and how did Brinkman get inside with the body?"

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I said, "You told me the answer to that yourself a little while ago, Eb."
"I told you?"

"Sure. You said something sarcastic about the killer maybe walking through a wall. But you were right: that's just what Brinkman did."

"Don't give me double-talk, damn it. Say what you mean."

"He came in through the window," I said.

"Window? What window?"

I pointed at the nearest of the two in the left-hand wall, the one closest to where I had found the body. "That window."

"Nuts," he said. "The gate is padlocked; I can see that from here. And the outside shutter is locked down—"

"Now it is," I said.

"What?"

"Eb, the beauty of Brinkman's little plan is that it's simple and it's obvious—so simple and so obvious that everybody just overlooked it." I went to the window and demonstrated as I talked. "Like this: I come in here on my rounds and I test the padlock on the gate; it's firmly in place. I glance through the bars and what do I see in this dim light? The window is closed and the shutter is lowered outside. So I automatically assume, just as anybody would, that both the window catch and the shutter catch are locked, because I *expect* them to be and because I *know* the gate is locked. For that same reason I don't bother to reach through and check either one.

"But the fact is, neither the window nor the shutter were locked at that time; just closed far enough to make me think they were. And the only person who could have rigged them that way is Brinkman: when I got here tonight he told me he'd already locked up himself. In fact he asked me to double-check him; he figured his little trick was foolproof and he wanted my testimony that the building was sealed when the fire broke out.

"What he did after he shot Judkins was to lift the shutter from the outside, then the window sash—slow and easy so I wouldn't be alerted—and then reach through the bars, open the gate padlock with his key, and swing the gate to one side. On his way out, after dropping the body, he closed the gate and relocked the padlock. Then he lowered the window—a little too hard in his haste, which explains the thumping sound I heard. But he couldn't have secured the window latch from the outside. . . ."

I reached through the bars, caught hold of the sash, and tugged. It glided upward a few inches on well oiled hinges. "And he didn't. The clicking noise I heard just before putting on the lights was him closing the shutter hard enough to make its latch catch at the bottom—something he *could* do from the outside."

"And with all the inside gates and outside shutters in place," Klein said, "who'd think to try one of the windows sandwiched between them? Or attach the right significance to it if they did?" He shook his head. "I see what you mean by simple and obvious."

Brinkman saw too. He saw the expression on Fran Robbins' face: anger and fear and a congealing hatred. He saw the expressions on the faces of the law. All the bluff went out of him at once, and along with it whatever inner force had been holding him together; he sat down hard on one of the crates, like a doll with sand-stuffed legs, and covered up his own face with both hands.

They never learn, I thought. The clever ones especially—they just never learn.

"The way it happened with Judkins," Eberhardt said, "was pretty much as you called it. He telephoned Brinkman at Robbins' apartment and told him he'd been thinking things over and didn't want to go ahead with the torch job for the five hundred dollars Brinkman was paying him; he wanted another five hundred and he wanted it now. Brinkman tried to tell him he didn't have that much cash available, but Judkins wouldn't listen. Either Brinkman delivered the money right away or not only wouldn't he do the torch job, he'd blow the whistle to the insurance company."

"Nice guy, Judkins," I said.

"Yeah." Eberhardt fired up his pipe. It was the following afternoon and we were sitting in a tavern on Union Street, having a companionable beer—his treat—before he headed down to the Hall of Justice. "Anyhow, Brinkman didn't have any choice; he agreed to meet Judkins and did, a half block from the company. All he had on him was fifty bucks, but he promised Judkins the rest as soon as he could get it."

"Only Judkins wasn't having any of that."

"Nope. He was half drunk on gin, Brinkman says, and in a belligerent mood, and he'd brought a gun with him. He started waving it around and Brinkman got scared and ran. Straight to his building; says he was

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going to call to you for help. But Judkins caught up with him, there was a struggle, the gun went off. End of Judkins. Brinkman threw the gun—a .25 Browning—away later, into a trash bin a couple of blocks away. He led us right to it. Cooperating to beat the band, which probably means he'll cop a plea later on."

"Mm-hmm. What did he tell Fran Robbins when he got back to her place?"

"He fed her a line about some hardcases being the ones who wanted to burn down his company for the insurance; he had to go along with them or they'd muscle him around—that kind of thing. So would she say he was with her all evening? She went along with it. And after he called the company and supposedly discovered from us that Judkins was dead, he told her it must have been the hardcases who'd killed him. She went along with that too. Until you staged your little scene in the warehouse. Now she can't wait to testify against him."

"I don't blame her much," I said.

"Neither do I. One other thing, in case you're wondering. Brinkman firing McIntyre doesn't fit into things at all, except as an intended ploy to throw off the insurance investigators even more: would a guy about to burn down his own company fire one employee on the day of the blaze, promote another, and make plans to hire a third? A sort of red herring, I guess you could say."

I leaned back and had some of my draft. "So that's that then."

"That's that," Eberhardt agreed. "Until next time."

"Next time?"

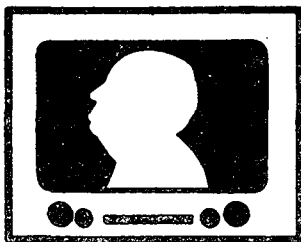
"Next time you get mixed up in some sort of funny business. Another locked room, say, or another impossible-crime thing."

"Uh-uh," I said. "No way. From now on I'm taking your advice; nothing but simple skip traces and missing-relative investigations. I may even let myself get hit on the head once or twice, just to promote the Sam Spade image."

"Absolutely no more locked rooms or impossible crimes, huh?"

"Absolutely not."

Eberhardt made a snorting sound and blew a cloud of pipe smoke at me. "Want to bet?" he said.



CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

Before *Psycho*, Robert Bloch had primarily been known as a prolific magazine writer and novelist specializing in the mystery. With the spectacular impact of the Hitchcock thriller, Bloch became—with his first film sale—the author of the book on which the highest-grossing mystery film ever made was produced. This in turn gave him carte blanche these past nearly two decades (*Psycho* was released in 1960) to struggle in the Hollywood vineyards. Recently Bob Bloch discussed his movie and television career with COS—a career not without bumps and surprises.

It is well known that Bloch's New York agent—Bob himself at that time was a writer living in a small town in central Wisconsin—had no idea he was selling *Psycho* to Alfred Hitchcock. A blind offer had come from MCA for an amount of money which at Bloch's insistence was finally upped to \$9,500. Then it was announced that it was Hitchcock who was doing the property.

It was not a lot of money, but Bloch has always been grateful to the director for having taste and courage—and sticking to what he had bought. In lesser hands the film might have been just so much grue; Hitch, however, remained remarkably true to his source. One significant change was casting Norman Bates as a younger man rather than corpulent and middle-aged as had been the real-life Midwest murderer who in part inspired the novel. This resulted when Tony Perkins' agent showed the director a print of *Fear Strikes Out* in which the actor played baseball player Jimmy Piersall, whose conflicts with his father caused him to have

a nervous breakdown. Perkins became the proprietor of the Bates Motel, and has since had to struggle to escape identification as a maniac.

No one had faith in *Psycho*, least of all Paramount, the releasing studio, who wanted even to change the title. It has made many millions.

Even before *Psycho* had started filming Bloch was on his way to Hollywood to do writing assignments in TV. His first movie screenplay was *The Couch* (1962), in which a very pleasant though troubled young man (Grant Williams) acts out his homicidal tendencies in the streets of Los Angeles while on his way to regular sessions with his psychiatrist. While we vaguely can surmise just *who* his final victim will be, and the very sane reasons for the crimes, Bloch keeps the whole thing so briskly up in the air that it is a satisfying effort. No so for Bloch, however. Warners was going through an economy phase and trimmed the film's budget murderously—all the subjective-viewpoint scenes the writer had so carefully crafted were discarded for mere "talking heads." The film could have been much more.

His next project was *creatively* violated. He had constructed an update of the classic German Expressionist silent, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—not a retelling of the story, but a film spiritually true to the mood of the original, although with realistic dialogue and action. In his *Cabinet of Caligari* (1962) a woman (Glynis Johns) finds herself trapped by a madman in a wooded country estate. Only in the last few minutes we discover this is a fantasy, *her* fantasy while being treated in a sanatorium. Much of what Bloch had written was altered in the final film, and it was for him an unfortunate time.

His next project, however, was one of his favorites. *Straight-Jacket* (1964) started out being about a killer who wore a fat suit (!) but when producer William Castle discovered that Joan Crawford owed Columbia a picture it became the drama of an axe-murderess who is released after twenty years in a mental institute and reunited with her family; then several axe-murders occur in the neighborhood. The film has both depth and terror; the very surprising ending is carefully constructed. In addition to creating a satisfying mystery Bob had the pleasure of getting to know Joan Crawford.

On his first visit to her home he found the "hard-nosed, autocratic superstar" hard at work scrubbing a floor. She consistently sought his advice in her interpretation of the script—behavior unheard-of among the luminaries of Hollywood. Until her death they were never out of

touch; Joan was always unfailingly kind to Bob and his wife. Curiously, *Straight-Jacket* deals with a woman who has troubled relations with her daughter.

In his next film for Bill Castle, *The Night Walker*, Barbara Stanwyck is a troubled rich widow—her blind husband has been killed in an explosion—who discovers that recurring dreams can be *very* dangerous, even when Robert Taylor is along to protect her. What starts out as a surreal nightmare becomes a first-grade, carefully constructed mystery. Bloch again thinks it could have been better; Castle's haste to bring the film in under budget destroyed some of the quality Bloch had hoped to inject. In consequence "one is not able to see on the screen all of what I put in the script." Worse yet, one becomes associated with a low-budget level of films—a curious level for the book-author of one of the industry's top-grossing films!

The Skull, in 1965, was his first film in color and marked his first association with British film producer Milton Subotsky, whom he admires. It was vaguely based on one of his stories (the skull of the Marquis de Sade weaves a macabre influence on all those who possess it), made in England, and he did not do the script. But he did write the movie which Subotsky produced in England the following year, *The Psychopath*. ("I write the script here, they make the changes over there.") It is a twisty crime story about a series of murders leading to a house filled with life-sized dolls, a crippled woman, and her nervous son.

Bloch then attempted to bring to the screen H. F. Heard's classic *A Taste for Honey* in a respectful adaptation to star his old friends Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee. Another writer took the resultant *The Deadly Bees* (1967) and changed it completely, dropping Karloff and Lee in favor of a young girl singer who on a remote British island meets a madman who is training killer bees. That same year, for Subotsky, Bloch supplied three of his stories for an anthology film, *Torture Garden* (he resents the title, for the movie has nothing to do with tortures or gardens). The best story of the three is his "The Man Who Collected Poe," with Jack Palance in the role, but Bloch wryly observes, "They got very creative with the ending." Other anthology movies he's done since are *The House That Dripped Blood* (1971) and *Asylum* (1972).

Bloch has scripted two made-for-television movies, *The Cat Creature* (1973) and *The Dead Don't Die* (1975)—both combinations of murder mysteries and the occult, and both directed by mystery-oriented Curtis

Harrington. But he has also been very active in television series.

As might be expected, he contributed more than a dozen scripts to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. His favorites include "A Home Away from Home"—about a nurse who goes back to an asylum to slowly discover the inmates have taken over—and "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." The latter is a real curiosity: after it was made, the network refused to allow it to be shown on the air! It's about a magician's half-witted assistant (Norman Lloyd) who watches his master saw a girl in half and restore her again; he tries it himself with less than perfect results. (The girl is Diana Dors.) But after the show went into reruns it was slipped into the schedules and nobody has complained.

He has also written more than a dozen shows for *Thriller*, the anthology series hosted by Boris Karloff. Barre Lyndon adapted his legendary short story, "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper," for the program—but that tale had a healthy life before television, being done on a variety of radio shows, and this year was dramatized on Israeli radio! His favorite *Thriller* show is "A Good Imagination," about a man who *thinks* he has bricked his wife behind a wall. And there is also "Waxworks," the definitive wax-museum-at-midnight scare. He has written some seventy-five television scripts in all, for all the major drama series (for *Star Trek* he projected Jack the Ripper into outer space). He remembers his work on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *Thriller* as perhaps the most satisfying, creatively rewarding years of his life.

Right now he is working on a script for George Pal to be produced at American-International; the subject is still hush-hush. He has a great deal of hope for crime on screen—"The movie mystery has nowhere to go but up right now." But solid stories have to be substituted for car chases. And, he adds with that famous Robert Bloch twinkle in his eye, "I hope we will reach that stage of sophistication that the detective no longer at the climax goes to interview the villain in the latter's boat anchored in the marina."

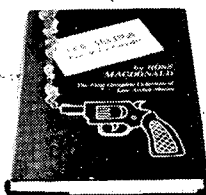


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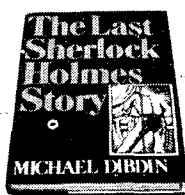
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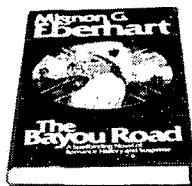
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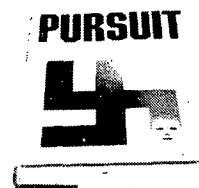
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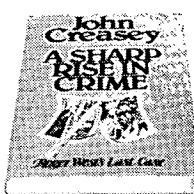
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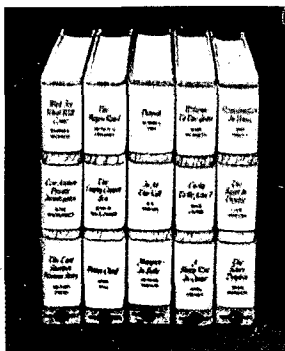
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